

THE INDYPENDENT

ISSUE #133, MARCH 20 – APRIL 16, 2009
A FREE PAPER FOR FREE PEOPLE

BATTLE IN THE BRONX

Labor Makes a Stand
in Hard Times

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PHOTO: JOEL COOK

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The Indypendent is a New York-based free newspaper published 17 times a year on Fridays. Since 2000, more than 600 citizen journalists, artists and media activists have contributed their time and energy to this project. Winner of dozens of New York Community Media Alliance awards, *The Indypendent* is dedicated to empowering people to create a true alternative to the corporate press by encouraging citizens to produce their own media. *The Indypendent* is funded by subscriptions, donations, grants, merchandise sales, benefits and advertising from organizations with similar missions. Volunteers write and edit articles, take photographs, do design work and illustrations, help distribute papers, update the website and more! *The Indypendent* reserves the right to edit articles for length, content and clarity.

The Indypendent is the newspaper project of the New York City Independent Media Center, which is affiliated with the global Indymedia movement (indymedia.org), an international network that is dedicated to fostering grassroots media production. NYC IMC sponsors three other projects, the children's newspaper *IndyKids*, the IndyVideo news team and the NYC IMC open publishing website (nyc.indymedia.org). NYC IMC relies on volunteer participation and is open to anyone who is interested.

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community calendar

Please send event announcements to
indyevents@gmail.com. Next deadline
is April 7.

MAR 19

The unfortunate 6th anniversary of the Iraq War.

WED MAR 25

7pm • FREE
FILM/DISCUSSION: TAX RESISTANCE IN THE MEDIA. Join the NYC War Resisters League in exploring the ways media is used to encourage people to continue to pay their taxes even when they oppose how their tax dollars are being spent and the ways that media can be used to encourage people to resist. Judson Memorial Church, 241 Thompson St (btwn W 3rd St & Washington Sq S) 646-662-7486 • nycwrl@worldnet.att.net

THU MAR 26

7pm • \$5 Suggested
SCREENING: *NOHO HEWA*. The documentary *Noho Hewa: The Wrongful Occupation of Hawai'i* tells the little known history of the occupation and ethnic cleansing of Hawai'i. Bluestockings, 172 Allen St (btwn Stanton & Rivington Sts) 212-777-6028 • bluestockings.com

FRI MAR 27

8:30pm • \$10
FILMS: "JUGGLING GENDER: POLITICS, SEX AND IDENTITY" AND "STILL JUGGLING" with filmmaker Tami Gold and Jennifer Miller. See two videos on Miller, a lesbian performer who lives her life with a full beard and works as a performance artist, circus director, clown and as the "bearded lady" in one of the only remaining sideshows in the United States. The Brecht Forum, 451 West Street (btwn Bank and Bethune Sts;) 212-242-4201 brechtforum@brechtforum.com

SAT MAR 28

Noon-3pm • FREE
EVENT: "CONFERENCE TO DEFEND PUBLIC EDUCATION." After more than six years of mayoral control, hundreds of NYC schools are labeled failing or near-failing and dozens more are being closed for "reorganization." John Jay College, Room 1311 North Hall Bldg 718-601-4901 • asc.ice.uft@gmail.com nycore.org

SUN MAR 29

2pm • FREE
FILM/DISCUSSION: "AFGHAN WOMEN: A HISTORY OF STRUGGLE." This documentary follows a group of Afghan women struggling to make sense of a world up-turned by local and international conflict. Rutgers University, Newark Campus, Paul Robeson Center, 350 Martin Luther King Blvd., Newark, NJ afsc.org

TUE MAR 31

9am-11am • FREE
EVENT: "NYC SUMMIT ON RACE & GENDER IN THE RESTAURANT INDUSTRY." Learn strategies to provide the best practices to foster equality and worker opportunity to create a more equitable and productive restaurant sector. Breakfast provided. Sponsored by NYC Restaurant Industry Coalition and Restaurant Opportunities Center of NY. Tom Colicchio's Craftsteak Restaurant, 85 10th Ave 212-343-1771 • summit@rocny.org

WED APR 1

4pm • FREE
TALK: "GAZA: HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE MEDIA RESPONSE." Join Columbia University Arab Studies Professor Rashid Khalidi for a discussion about human-rights violations and media bias in the Israel-Palestine conflict. Sponsored by the National Lawyers Guild and Fordham Law School Chapter. Fordham Law School, Room 312 140 W 62nd St (btwn Amsterdam and Columbus) fordhamnlg@gmail.com

SAT APR 4

11am • FREE
EVENT: NATIONAL MARCH ON WALL STREET. Billions of dollars funneled toward the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and Wall Street bailouts while every day social services are cut down by significant margins. United for Peace and Justice member groups and peace activists will be having a national march in the heart of Wall Street, ending with a rally in front of the New York Stock Exchange. Franklin and White Streets, (btwn Broadway and Lafayette) unitedforpeace.org • 212-868-5545

SUN APR 5

10am-4pm • FREE
RECYCLE: COMPUTER AND ELECTRONICS. Drop off your old

MAR-APR



FILMS: "JUGGLING GENDER: POLITICS, SEX & IDENTITY" & "STILL JUGGLING." with filmmaker Tami Gold and Jennifer Miller at The Brecht Forum. (SEE FRIDAY, MARCH 27)

television sets, printers, laptops, radios, cell phones, disks, wires and computers. Sponsored by the Lower East Side Ecology Center and Council member Rosie Mendez. Union Square, North Plaza • lesecology-center.org

TUE APR 7

7pm • FREE
READING/DISCUSSION: "WHY DO YOU KILL?" Join author Jürgen Todenhöfer (ex-member of the German Parliament) and take a look inside the Iraqi resistance. McNally Jackson, 52 Prince St (btwn Lafayette & Mulberry Sts) 212-274-1160 events@mcnallyrobinsonnyc.com

SAT/SUN APR 11-12

11am-8pm • FREE
EVENT: THIRD ANNUAL NYC ANARCHIST BOOK FAIR. Whether you are an anarchist with deep ties and knowledge or anarcho-curious and looking to find out more about anarchism, the bookfair is for you. Judson Memorial Church, 241 Thompson St (btwn W 3rd St & Washington Sq S) anarchistbookfair.net

WED APR 15

7:30pm • \$6/10/15 (Sliding scale)

DISCUSSION: "THE CRISIS IN (LEFT) PUBLISHING." The growth of chain bookstores and the Internet has hardly been kind to publishing ventures, even long before the current recession. The Brecht Forum, 451 West Street (btwn Bank and Bethune) 212-242-4201 brechtforum@brechtforum.com

WED APR 15

6pm • FREE
MEETING: GLOBAL AIDS ACTIVISM. For recent immigrants living with HIV, fighting for access to treatment in their home country, or wanting to have the United States do more to stop global AIDS pandemic. Every 3rd Wednesday of the month. Sponsored by Health Global Access Project and New York City AIDS Housing Network. 80A 4th Ave, Bklyn (btw St Marks & Bergen Sts) 917-517-5202 • jflynn@healthgap.org

SAT APR 19

4pm • FREE
EVENT: SUPPORT PALESTINIAN POLITICAL PRISONERS. Join Al-Awda NY and the Jericho Movement to mark Palestinian Prisoners' Day with performances, workshops and films Solidarity Center, 55 W 17th St 5th Floor (btwn 5th Ave and 6th Ave) 718-288-8636 • info@al-awdany.org

reader comments

Post your own comments at
indypendent.org at the end of
an article or email us at letters@indypendent.org.

TENANTS HAVE RIGHTS TOO

Response to "Battle in Albany: Rent Reform Showdown," Feb. 27:

The whole myth about rent regulation is that "owners lose money." Built into rent regulation is a profit margin for landlords. If landlords who own rent-regulated buildings can't turn a profit, then they are bad business owners (who probably want to be bailed out). City taxes are also quite low compared to the suburbs and although landlords scream about taxes, they don't

really have a complaint. Insurance premiums too high, join the friggin' club complainer. Food and clothing are also regulated (e.g. FDA). Bad arguments; and this is why it is time to strengthen the rent laws.

—ANONYMOUS

I'm so happy that these bills are moving forward, now it is up to us to let the New York State Senate know how badly New York City tenants need relief. Low- to middle-income tenants have been completely squeezed out of the equation by greedy landlords and developers. Hopefully the economic crisis will be an impetus to restore some balance. And if the landlords don't want to own the

buildings anymore then sell it to us tenants and we'll run it ourselves.

—MARIA

WHEN WILL IT END?

Response to "NYPD Racist Tactics Exposed," Feb. 27:

Even the rather appalling figure of more than 500, 000 people stopped, mostly people of color, per year is probably too low. The police often don't fill out stop-and-frisk reports when they stop people. Another really damning indicator of the racial and class nature of policing in New York City are the number of arrests for minor offenses. The number of folks (mostly black or Latino) arrested for possession of pot

increased ten-fold from 1997 to 2007 over the previous decade, to 400,000 people.

—MATT



Bridging the Gay-Straight Divide

BY ARIEL TIROSH

When a boy in Joleen Hanlon’s second-grade class announced to his friends that he did not like girls, a classmate told him that someday he would marry one.

Hanlon, an assistant teacher at a charter school in Astoria, intervened, noting that sometimes two men get married and sometimes people don’t marry at all. She was later reprimanded for her actions.

“I don’t think I did anything wrong,” Hanlon said, acknowledging that school officials are sensitive to what parents may think about teachers openly discussing homosexuality.

In contrast, Nila Marrone, of Parents for Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), related a story about a child being asked if he knew what a gay man was, and the child responded that of course he did, his friend had two daddies.

Still, Marrone acknowledged that parents are wary. She spoke of parents who have told her that their children’s schools were teaching them to be gay because of Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs).

Marrone blamed this on parents not understanding the programs at their child’s school. “Parents need to come to meetings

like PTA and become involved in the student’s lives,” she said.

GSAs are student clubs in middle schools, high schools and colleges that promote tolerance and the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youth. The first U.S.-based GSAs began in Massachusetts in the late 1980s. There are currently more than 3,500 nation-wide.

Marrone and Hanlon are part of a group of gay-rights activists involved in planning Beyond Tolerance 3, a March 28 event devoted to the creation and maintenance of GSAs city-wide. The event is sponsored by NYQueer, a working group with the New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE).

Founded in 2002, NYCoRE fights for social justice in public schools through workshops and public activism. Its mission is to reform the education system by re-appropriating funds, getting rid of zero-tolerance policies and transforming a teacher’s role in the school.

Alanna P. Howe is an elementary-school teacher who worried about homophobic tendencies in her students. Some teachers talk to their students about gay lifestyles, but she has not heard of many.

“So when these little kids get up into middle and high school where there of-

ten isn’t any kind of GSA or anti-homo/[transgender]phobia work being done either, the continued constant exposure from such a young age just reinforces those tendencies as acceptable norms,” Howe said.

Beyond Tolerance 3 will be aimed primarily at giving teachers the resources they need to promote GSAs at their schools, but will also be providing tools to students so that they can feel empowered to be active and participate in causes they believe in. The event will include workshops and forums for educators and students to voice their concerns, both to themselves and to each other.

NYQueer is also involved in lobbying for an amendment to the 2004 Dignity for All Students Act, which addresses hate-based bullying in schools. The bill prevents school administrators from discriminating against student clubs, including GSAs. This bill goes beyond gay rights and protects students from racial, gender, sexual, religious and other discrimination. The proposed amendment (A03661/S01987) is currently being debated in the State legislature.

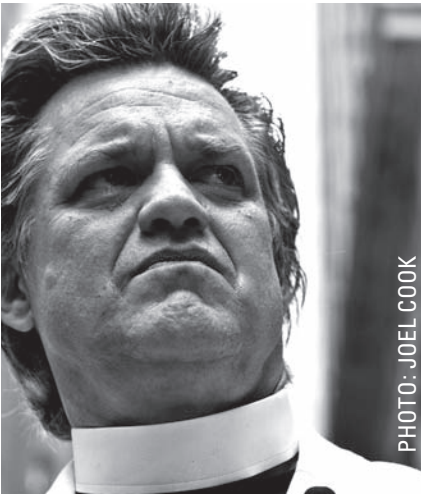


PHOTO: JOEL COOK

The Church of Stop Bloomberg

BY JACOB SCHEIER

It’s hard to imagine someone as different from New York’s current mayor, Michael Bloomberg, as performance-activist William Talen (a.k.a. Reverend Billy), who recently announced his mayoral candidacy on the Green Party ticket.

While Bloomberg is often seen in a suit shaking hands with corporate developers, Talon wears a televangelist-style white suit and collar, and preaches against consumerism. He is the pastor, if you will, of the Church of Life After Shopping, formerly known as the Church of Stop Shopping. Directed by his life-partner Savitri D., the parody church holds services in which Talen’s sermons are backed by a 35-person choir. More often, however, they are out staging theatrical demonstrations against the chain stores and developers welcomed into New York by Bloomberg.

While Bloomberg recently said the state shouldn’t raise taxes on millionaires because “we want rich people from around the country to move here,” Talen’s preaches a gospel of community-oriented life. One of the main slogans for the campaign will be “the rise of the neighborhoods,” he says. “These bubble economies that come into neighborhoods isolate us from each other ... make environments impersonal [and] concentrate money into the hands of a few unseen absentee landlords and bankers.”

What New York needs instead, says Talen, are “healthy neighborhoods” where “you know the people near you, you have congregating places, you have ongoing narratives ... the buoyant fun life of a great sassy New York neighborhood is something [people] love.”

Although Talen relies on parody in his activist performances, this is a serious campaign. Talen has a high enough profile so he will have little trouble collecting the 7,500 signatures needed to get on the ballot. He is also fairly confident that the campaign can raise \$250,000, which would entitle them to more than \$2 million in matching funds from the New York City Campaign Finance Board. The campaign also has a staff of more than 50 people, mostly volunteers. It includes people with professional backgrounds in urban planning, city politics, climate science and graphic design.

Asked whether he can really win against Bloomberg and his giant pool of money, Talen took a meditative pause and responded, “absolutely.”

To read the entire interview with William Talen, visit Independent.org. For more information about Talen and his mayoral campaign, visit voterevbilly.org and revbilly.com.



BE THE MEDIA!

Teachers and families came to support the release of *Struggle to be Strong: An Anthology of Empowerment* March 12, a book written by 86 immigrant students at the International High School at Lafayette in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. The Café Night featured students reading from their work, dramatic performances and songs. Teachers Christina Zawerucha and Leah Hamilton mentored the media project where students wrote about personal struggles and heroes. Student’s stories discussed family deaths, drugs, discrimination, relationships and war. “One of the ways of telling a great story is to look at your life and the struggles that you’ve had and how they’ve made you stronger,” Zawerucha said.

PHOTO: MARK BAILEY

UPCOMING EVENTS:

Beyond Tolerance 3
Saturday, March 28,
10 a.m. to 4 p.m.
230 West 13th Street, Manhattan
nycore.org/nyqueer

National Day of Silence
Students across the country will take a vow of silence April 17 to bring attention to anti-LGBTQ behavior in schools.
dayofsilence.org

Equality and Justice Day
Hundreds of gay-rights activists will go to Albany for a day to lobby elected officials April 28. Register at *Beyond Tolerance 3*, March 28.
prideagenda.org

Indydependent Anchor Coordintor Takes New Job

BY JESSICA LEE

For many of the hundreds of *Indydependent* contributors and volunteers during the past eight years, it has been impossible to separate John Tarleton from the newspaper.

Tarleton stepped into the office of *The Indydependent* in the spring of 2001 with a large backpack on his shoulders after a decade of traveling, writing and laboring as a migrant farm worker. A former daily news reporter, he immediately became involved in *The Indydependent*, a dinky newspaper struggling to define itself.

One hundred and twenty five issues and many millions of printed pages later, Tarleton, 41, is stepping down as a full-time coordinator of *The Indydependent* to become the Associate Editor at *Clarion*, the newspaper of the Professional Staff Congress, a

progressive union that represents the 22,000 faculty and professional staff of the City University of New York.

Launched in September 2000, *The Indydependent* has grown to become one of the premiere alternative newspapers in the country and is a magnet for independent journalists, artists and community activists. Tarleton played a key role in the paper’s development as a writer, editor, volunteer coordinator and architect of the paper’s citywide distribution network, among other roles.

Continued on page 12





Fraud Common in Renovation Increases, Study Says

BY STEVEN WISHNIA

If your apartment has been renovated and you're paying more than \$1,000 a month, there's a strong chance the rent is illegally high. Fraudulent rent increases for apartment renovations are a major reason affordable housing is disappearing from New York, claims a recent study by the Association for Neighborhood and Housing Development (ANHD).

The report, "The \$20,000 Stove: How Fraudulent Rent Increases Undermine New York's Affordable Housing," examines the "1/40th rule," which lets landlords raise the rent in rent-stabilized apartments by 1/40th of the cost of the improvements. For example, if owners spend \$20,000 to put in new kitchen appliances, new bathroom fixtures and new floors, they can then raise the rent by \$500 a month. They cannot claim such increases for ordinary maintenance such as painting.

ANHD estimates that such increases raised the rent to above \$1,000 on 164,000 apartments between 2002 and 2005 — far more than the number of apartments that rose past that mark because of the normal rent increases allowed under rent stabilization. From 2002 to 2006, another 58,000 apartments went over \$2,000 and were deregulated.

"It's a core, core issue," says ANHD Deputy Director Benjamin Dulchin. "We're losing an incredible amount of affordable housing when apartments go from \$600 to \$1,800 a month."

The system is lucrative for landlords even when they have legitimately done the renovations they claim, he says, because it lets them make back their investment within four years and then continue collecting a large and permanent rent increase. But there are almost no checks on fraud. "Landlords are allowed to universally impose 1/40th rent increases without prior approval, even documentation," the study says.

No one knows how much fraud there really is, because the Division of Housing and Community Renewal (DHCR) "is doing absolutely no oversight," Dulchin explains. "The chance of getting caught if you game the system is absolutely infinitesimal."

The only way an illegal overcharge can be detected is if the tenant complains to the DHCR. Most tenants, however, have no idea of what the previous rent on their apartment was, what renovations were done and how much that work cost. Tenants in deregulated apartments may also worry that their landlords won't renew their lease if they file a complaint.

The ANHD report cites eight cases that have come before either the DHCR or New York City Housing Court. In one, a Bronx landlord was found to have fraudulently raised rent by \$400 a month by claiming he had spent \$15,000 installing new floors, sinks and more. There was no evidence the work had actually been done and the landlord had no receipts for expenses. In another, a Forest Hills tenant paying \$2,000 filed a complaint with DHCR after he found that the previous tenant had been paying \$800. After pricing the new fixtures in the kitchen and bathroom, he concluded there was no way the landlord could have spent \$40,000 on materials and labor.

"We respect the logic of encouraging landlords to make improvements," Dulchin says, but the law must "make it reasonable and discourage fraud." The law covering building-wide major capital improvements, he notes, requires landlords to document their expenses and inform tenants and the DHCR about them.

Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver (D) has introduced a bill, A5316, that would give the DHCR authority to approve or disapprove rent increases for apartment improvement and limit them to 1/84 of the cost — the amount allowed for major capital improvements. Landlords could collect such increases only if they had given the tenant an explanation, had no major outstanding violations and had filed documentation with DHCR.

The bill was referred to the Assembly Housing Committee Feb. 12. It does not yet have a sponsor in the state Senate.

A longer version of this story appeared in *Tenant*.



NO WHERE TO GO: New York City homeless people often take shelter in the subway. PHOTO: FLICKR/KEBELLA

BY ALEX KANE

With the number of homeless families hitting record highs, a new plan issued by New York City's Department of Homeless Services in December has advocates for the homeless worried about a cutback in services for the homeless citywide. Critics of the plan fear that more than 30 faith-based shelters might have to close and that overnight services in many drop-in centers would be eliminated.

"At the end of the day, [the proposals] will reduce overnight shelter and overnight capacity significantly and make it much harder for the street homeless to get the help they need," says Patrick Markee, senior policy analyst at the Coalition for the Homeless.

The Department of Homeless Services (DHS) issued two requests for proposals (RFPs) Dec. 12 that involve the operation of five drop-in centers and a respite bed program for homeless single adults. The respite bed program would replace the current Emergency Shelter Network Program. The request, which is the process the city follows to contract out services, indicates that newly approved contractors will begin services in compliance with the RFP guidelines in early July.

The new respite bed program would mandate that faith-based and community shelter spaces be open for a minimum of five nights a week with a minimum of 10 beds, will be difficult for some locations to do, as they rely on volunteer labor and have limited bed space. Other concerns include proposed changes to the screening process and the type of transportation to be used when moving the homeless from drop-in centers to shelter spaces.

DHS maintains that the plan will improve the city's homeless policies. "Our strategies, including reorganization of our street outreach program and the RFPs, will continue to produce results and move street homeless individuals into housing," spokesperson Kristy Buller wrote in an email message. "These innovative solutions have less red tape and barriers to entry, resulting in increased chances clients will accept services and housing, not less."

John Benfatti, the co-president of the Riverdale Yonkers Society for Ethical Culture and emergency overnight shelter coordinator, may be forced to close his center because he does not have the volunteer labor or beds to meet the new requirements.

"We're a very small operation, so I feel very threatened by what the mayor is doing," Benfatti says.

Drop-in centers, which currently are open 24 hours a day, provide homeless people with vital services and refer them to church-run shelters or community centers outside the municipal shelter network. Many homeless people say

that the city-run homeless centers are dangerous and refuse to go to them. If necessary, some facilities currently people to sleep at the drop-in center in folding chairs. The proposal would prohibit people from sleeping at drop-in centers.

Under the drop-in center directives, the facilities would only operate from 7:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. In addition, the plan would cut the budget for busing homeless adults to shelters, instead providing people with MetroCards to reach their designated bed. This could mean that individuals would arrive at respite beds at various times during the night, instead of together in one bus load.

"[In the proposals], there is no mandate for direct transportation between the drop-in centers and our shelters," says Channa Camins, social action coordinator for Congregation B'nai Jeshurun.

Critics of the proposal also note that reducing drop-in center hours would limit the time available for pre-screening before individuals are assigned a respite bed. This could lead to intoxicated or potentially dangerous individuals finding their way to a shelter space.

Camins oversees a women's shelter at her synagogue in Manhattan. "We need to be clear that we are providing for the safety of both the guests and our volunteers at all times," she says.

The Coalition for the Homeless issued a report Dec. 15 entitled "The Bloomberg Administration Moves Forward to Reduce Emergency Shelter for Street Homeless New Yorkers" sharply criticizing the city's new plan, which will be implemented through the RFPs. The report says that the plan will reduce overnight shelter placements by approximately 17 percent.

The cuts in services come on the heels of the closings of a number of drop-in centers and overnight shelters. According to the Coalition for the Homeless, the Bloomberg administration eliminated funding for two drop-in centers this past June, leaving nine in place. The new directives would close two more, and in Manhattan, where street homelessness is most concentrated, only three drop-in centers would remain — down from the seven that were open before June 2008. Furthermore, the faith-based network will be downsized from the 56 spaces that are now available to about 24, with most of the closings concentrated in Brooklyn and Manhattan.

"The closing of the churches is a slap in the face to the hundreds or thousands of members of congregations throughout the city," says Zoilo Torres, the director of the Emergency Shelter Network for the Partnership for the Homeless, the organization that links the DHS to the numerous religious or community shelters around the city. Torres says his organization did not apply for the DHS

Continued on page 6

New Rules Favor Developers, Critics Charge

By Gerard Flynn

Rule changes proposed by the New York City Department of Buildings in February have been slammed by critics citywide, and have raised fears that the changes could lead to a significant rise in illegal construction across the city and boroughs after they are implemented in mid-April.

The Rules of the City of New York (RCNY) guide city agencies like the Department of Buildings (DOB) when interpreting the City Charter and enforcing its laws. RCNY changes can be made by the Buildings Department without a vote from the City Council.

As the current rules governing the DOB stand, members of the public are not subject to time constraints when raising objections to approved plans for new buildings or major alterations with the Buildings Department.

However, come mid-April, Rules 105-04 and 105-03 will impose a 30-day public challenge period for challenging construction plans approved by the Buildings Department. The move has raised an outcry among politicians at both the city and state level.

“This is a Trojan horse, permitting developers to run roughshod over communities,” said State Assemblymember, James F. Brennan (D-Brooklyn) at a March 6 press conference on the steps of City Hall.

Brennan was flanked by fellow Democrats and City Councilmembers, Rosie Mendez (D-Manhattan) and Tony Avella (D-Queens).

Avella, who is chair of the City Council’s Zoning and Franchise Committee, had some hard-hitting words for the DOB, which he has called the “most corrupt and incompetent agency in the history of New York City.” He called the proposed rule changes an “outrage” and asked for them to be scrapped.

“This is a blatant attempt to eliminate community review of construction projects in our neighborhood. It must be stopped,” Avella said.

The 30-day review period for new development or major building improvements begins the day the plans are published on the DOB website.

At a packed hearing following the press conference, opponents of the move from the offices of elected officials, civic groups and block associations submitted testimony to the DOB’s Assistant General Counsel Deborah Glikin. All opposed the rule changes.

Chief among their concerns with the 30-day deadline is the ease with which it could be circumvented by developers wishing to avoid public scrutiny of their construction projects.

If a mem-

ber of the public does not check the website every day, there would be virtually no way they would know if plans, legal or not, had been approved by the Buildings Department, opponents of the rule changes noted.

A developer, they charged, could easily wait out the 30-day deadline before commencing construction, then post a permit on-site three days later as the new rules will require.

Though not part of the rule changes, the Department did come in for some praise, however, for promising to post a zoning diagram online, graphically showing the proposed zoning bulk, yards and tree planting, an unprecedented move nationwide.

However, even this proposal was blasted as another pitfall, requiring background knowledge of the zoning resolution and, if not, the time-consuming task of finding an expert, critics charged.

Critics of the 30-day review period point to an already lax process for DOB approving development plans. Under the DOB Professional Certification Program, registered architects and engineers can certify that their own plans are “in compliance with all applicable laws.” As a result, many plans are approved with barely more than a glance from a Buildings plan examiner, critics charge.

The latest statistics from the Independent Budget Office of the City of New York show that close to 50 percent of all new construction plans were professionally certified in 2007. Of these, almost 25 percent were randomly audited by Buildings. Approximately 22 percent of those plans were later revoked.

A spokesperson for the Buildings Department, Carly Sullivan, said that missing the 30-day deadline does not preclude the public from challenging construction applications because a construction permit represents a “final determination” from the Department. Objections to approved plans can still be challenged before the Board of Standards and Appeals (BSA).

However, critics counter, rerouting the DOB responsibilities to the BSA can be prohibitively expensive and can tangle objections in a complicated legal process.

BSA decisions can also, critics say, be appealed all the way past the state’s Supreme Court to the Court of Appeals, possibly drawing out the legal process for years and adding to the onerous cost.

East Village resident Monte Schapiro recalled his experience appealing the DOB’s approval of an illegal construction on top of his rent-stabilized building. Three years later, one case is currently being heard by the stat’s Supreme Court and the other is possibly being appealed to the Appellate Division. In both cases, although the BSA unanimously ruled against the DOB reversing that agency’s approval and calling for the permits to be revoked. Schapiro said the rule changes have “nothing whatsoever to do with facilitating public challenges,” as Bloomberg and DOB Commissioner Robert LiMandri have said.

“What it all comes down to is this. The DOB not only allows illegal work to take place now it wants to place time restrictions on the public’s right to challenge these things,” Schapiro said.

PHOTO: MAHINA MOVEMENT



UPCOMING EVENTS AT THE BRECHT FORUM

FRIDAY, MARCH 27, 7:30PM *JUGGLING GENDER* AND *STILL JUGGLING* DVD PREMIERE WITH TAMI GOLD AND JENNIFER MILLER

SUNDAY, APRIL 5, 5PM-9PM AFRO LATINO CAFE

THURSDAY, APRIL 9, 7:30PM FILM NOIR: AMERICAN WORKERS AND POSTWAR HOLLYWOOD WITH DENNIS BROE

TUESDAY, APRIL 14, 7:30PM FILM SCREENING: *VENEZUELA FROM THE INSIDE OUT*. DISCUSSION WITH CLIFTON ROSS

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 15, 7:30PM THE CRISIS IN (LEFT) PUBLISHING, WITH REV. RACHEL GUIDERA, RAMSEY KANAAN, COLIN ROBINSON & AMY SCHOLDER

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Fragmented Families

By Karen Yi

Immigrant rights activists across the country were taken aback Feb. 24 when U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents arrested 28 undocumented Latino immigrants at a manufacturing plant in Bellingham, Wash.

The first workplace raid since the Obama administration took office signalled a break with candidate Barack Obama’s promises of comprehensive immigration reform and U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano’s repeated remarks that immigration enforcement would focus on employers, not immigrant workers.

Napolitano said she was not aware of the raid and ordered a review of ICE and its enforcement policies.

“The president believes we must respect due process and our best values as we enforce the law,” said White House spokesperson Nick Shapiro Feb. 26 in *The Washington Times*. “The real answer to our broken immigration system is to fix it. The president has said that we will start the immigration reform debate this year, and this continues to be the plan.”

Undeterred by the raid, immigrant-rights activists are intent on holding President Obama accountable. On March 3, immigrant-rights organizations and families directly affected by deportations lobbied in Washington, D.C., for a bill that would give immigration judges discretion in deportation cases involving the separation of families with children who are U.S. citizens. Congressman Jose Serrano (D-NY) reintroduced the Child Citizen Protection Act (CCPA) in January. The bill was first introduced in 2006 but failed to rally enough support to become law.

Human Rights Watch reported that more than 1.6 million families have been separated due to deportations since the passage of the 1996 immigration laws.

Participating in the lobby day were 60 individuals with Families for Freedom, the Northern Manhattan Coalition for Immigrant Rights and the American Friends Service Committee, who met with 25 legislators or their staff March 3, sharing personal testimonies, news articles and Serrano’s letter of support. In solidarity, Homies Unidos, a Los Angeles-based organization, carried out a phone campaign the same day, encouraging California congresspeople to support CCPA.

On Capitol Hill, families and organizers



FAMILY FREEDOMS: Washington Heights resident and U.S. citizen Nicolas Nuñez, 19, is one of many young people speaking out about how U.S. immigration policy is ripping families apart. His father was deported to the Dominican Republic in 2005. He joined a delegation of immigrant rights organizations to Washington, D.C., March 3 to lobby for the Child Citizen Protection Act, which was introduced into the U.S. House of Representatives in January. PHOTO: MARK BAILEY

divided into six groups of ten each, targeting legislators that had supported the bill in 2006, as well as members of the House subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security and International Law subcommittee. The bill H.R. 182 was introduced into the subcommittee Jan. 6.

Although the bill has yet to be introduced in the Senate, the groups also met with Sens. Chuck Schumer (D-NY) and Robert Menendez (D-NJ).

Sandy Placido, an organizer with the Northern Manhattan Coalition for Immigrant Rights, says the bill has ten co-sponsors so far — a good sign given that it was introduced two months ago. “It’s a very strategic moment right now,” Placido said, because “Obama is the son of an immigrant and has talked about family unity being important.”

Nothing speaks more to the urgent need to pass the CCPA than the stories of the children. Nineteen-year-old Nicolas Nuñez is one of the millions of children adversely affected by the stringent immigration laws. His father was deported to the Dominican Republic in 2005. “I let out what I had in my heart,” Nuñez said. “Why do I have to be away from my father ’cause he’s not a citizen and I was born here?”

Nuñez was one of many affected family members that came to make their voices heard. Spouses, children and relatives bold-

ly told their stories despite their immigration status.

“I’m speaking for those who are scared to speak out for themselves,” said Roxroy Salmon, a Jamaican immigrant fighting deportation. His children are all U.S. citizens. “I am campaigning on my behalf and others’ behalf who are in the same situation, so our children won’t be without their parents.”

“The system has been treating them bad,” says Chia-Chia Wang, an organizer with the American Friends Service Committee. “The unfair questions, the unfair treatment and the unfair system really angered them, and they wanted to talk about why the law is broken.”

Immigrant families pushed to humanize the immigration debate in Washington, D.C., bringing the family “to the forefront of policy making, to the face of legislators,” said Wang. That same day, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a report criticizing the effectiveness of the immigration enforcement program created in 1996. The program, known as 287(g) of the Immigration Nationality Act, deputized local law enforcers as immigration agents. Meant to reduce serious crime, it enabled local officials to deport immigrants for minor crimes like traffic violations or carrying an open container of alcohol in public.

The GAO report shows that current immigration policy revolves around the criminalization and subsequent policing

of immigrants. “Many things about comprehensive immigration reform only lead to more raids, more enforcement and border security,” said Manisha Vaze, an organizer at Families for Freedom. Looking at immigration through the narrowing lens of criminal enforcement and the “increased technology on the border,” Vaze says, “heightens fear and keeps families apart rather than unified.”

With deportations at an all-time high, CCPA advocates are seeking to shift the tone within the mainstream immigration debate. Recently, the Corrections Corporation of America announced the opening of a new ICE detention center in Gainesville, Ga. The facility will house 500 detainees. According to Vice President of Marketing and Communications Louise Grant, the center, set to open in the summer, is expected to fill up by the end of the year — a clear sign of more deportations to come.

With comprehensive immigration reform far from view, organizers are hoping the straightforward CCPA will become law.

“We want this bill to pass now because the children can’t wait for comprehensive immigration reform,” Placido says. “This is about children’s rights; this is about families in need. It’s really about giving the judge the power to judge, to do his or her job and to keep families together. We think it’s a very simple thing to ask.”

New City Homeless Service Rules

Continued from page 4

contract to help coordinate the network because “we basically felt it was bound to fail.”

The proposals come at a time of deepening economic crisis, skyrocketing foreclosures and a chronic shortage of affordable housing in New York. A report put out by the Coalition for the Homeless in December 2008 states that “as the current economic downturn worsens, the number of homeless families sleeping in municipal shelters has reached the highest point since modern homeless-

ness began.”The report says that more than 36,000 homeless people sleep in the city shelter system each night.

While the regulations continue to raise concern among advocates, grassroots activism has pressured city officials to engage in conversations with ardent critics of the plan. Thousands of petitions against the proposals were submitted to the Bloomberg administration, and at a recent meeting between DHS Commissioner Robert Hess and shelter coordinators from around the city, there were some verbal reassurances that “they were

willing to work with us and be flexible and meet most of the needs that we have,” said Cassandra Agredo, director of the St. Frances Xavier church’s mission.

Agredo sits on the Emergency Shelter Network’s steering committee, a newly formed group that is articulating the faith-based community’s concerns to Commissioner Hess. But, Agredo says, “We have no way of verifying that [our concerns] will go into the new contract until it actually happens or until they give us something in writing stating that they’re willing to meet our needs.”

DHS spokesperson Buller wrote in an email that the agency values “the assistance of our faith-based volunteers, as well as the clear role they hold in serving our homeless clients. DHS welcomes their continued involvement in a variety of ways and is committed to being as flexible as possible as we move forward.”

“[The mayor] is concerned about how much it costs to run the system as it is, and I agree from that perspective,” Benfatti says. “But we’re not dealing with a commodity that you buy and sell. We’re dealing with human lives.”

U.S. TAKES SMALL STEP IN EASING CUBA EMBARGO

By JIM LOBE

Leading advocates for lifting the nearly 50-year-old U.S. trade embargo against Cuba are hailing Congress's March 10 approval to ease — albeit in a mostly symbolic way — several restrictions on travel and sales to the Caribbean nation.

The bill, which was signed by President Barack Obama the following day, denies funding to the U.S. Treasury Department to enforce two restrictions, including travel to Cuba by Cuban-Americans, imposed by former President George W. Bush.

The bill also provides for a general license for travel by U.S. companies and individuals to Cuba for the purpose of selling U.S. agricultural and medical goods.

A Bush-imposed regulation had required that businesses wishing to sell their products in Cuba had to apply for a specific license on a case-by-case basis, a cumbersome process that discouraged many companies from engaging in trade.

“For the first time in almost a decade, Congress is acting to loosen the Cuba embargo and send these modest reforms to a president who has promised to change the policy rather than issue veto threats or keep things as they are,” asserted a joint statement by several groups, including the Centre for Democracy in the Americas and the Washington Office on Latin America.

“When we have a Congress and a president acting to make sensible changes in Cuba policy, this indicates to us that the ground has shifted and that there is momentum behind the efforts to make broader and more lasting changes in policy,” said the groups, which also included the U.S.-Cuba Policy Initiative of the New America Foundation and the Latin America Working Group.

The easing of the Cuba embargo comes a month before Obama's much-anticipated attendance at the Summit of the Americas in Trinidad where he will meet all of the hemisphere's leaders except Cuban President Raul Castro.

Before he travels to the Summit, Obama is widely expected to follow through on campaign promises to use his executive authority to lift two of the most controversial measures imposed by Bush, which limited the freedom of Cuban-Americans to visit their families in Cuba to once every three years and their ability to send remittances to their families on the island.

Anti-embargo activists, which not only in-

clude groups focused primarily on Cuba, but also major U.S. business associations, including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and human rights groups, such as Amnesty International, hope that Obama will go further than that, possibly by broadening the authority of the Treasury Department to issue general licenses for a wider range of travel to Cuba, including educational and cultural travel.

Of the three Cuba-related provisions Congress approved, two are mainly symbolic. Thus, Cuban-Americans will still be permitted to visit their families once every three years, but the Treasury Department, which is charged with enforcing the embargo, will not be permitted to prosecute those who wish to travel more often, because no funds will be appropriated for that purpose.

Similarly, U.S. food and medical companies that export goods to Cuba will still be required under law to receive payment in cash before their shipments leave U.S. ports. But, under the new provision, Treasury will not be able to prosecute companies that receive cash on actual delivery.

The third provision — permitting Treasury to issue a general license for agricultural and medical businesses wishing to export goods to Cuba rather than forcing companies to approve requests on a case-by-case basis — does mark a real change in the underlying law, according to Jake Colvin, vice president of the National Foreign Trade Council (NFTC), an association of major U.S. multinational corporations which strongly supports lifting the embargo.

“This will make travel to Cuba for a whole class of businesspeople much easier,” he told IPS.

All of the anti-embargo groups, including the NFTC, said the fact that Congress took the first step toward easing the embargo should make it easier for Obama to go beyond his campaign promises to ease restrictions on Cuban-American travel and remittances.

“This debate shows how significantly the U.S. political climate has changed on Cuba,” said Sarah Stephens, director of the Centre for Democracy in the Americas. “I believe there is momentum in Congress to make travel available for all, but the president need not wait for legislation to seize the initiative,” she said.

A version of this article was originally published by the Inter Press Service. Jim Lobe's blog on U.S. foreign policy can be read at <http://www.ips.org/blog/jimlobel>.

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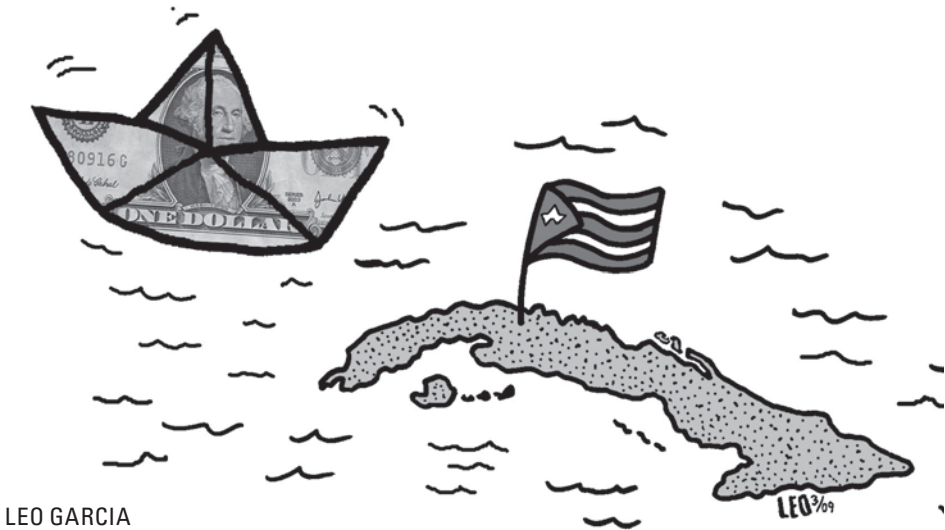
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LEO GARCIA

The Great Depth of the Climate Crisis

BY ROBERT JENSEN

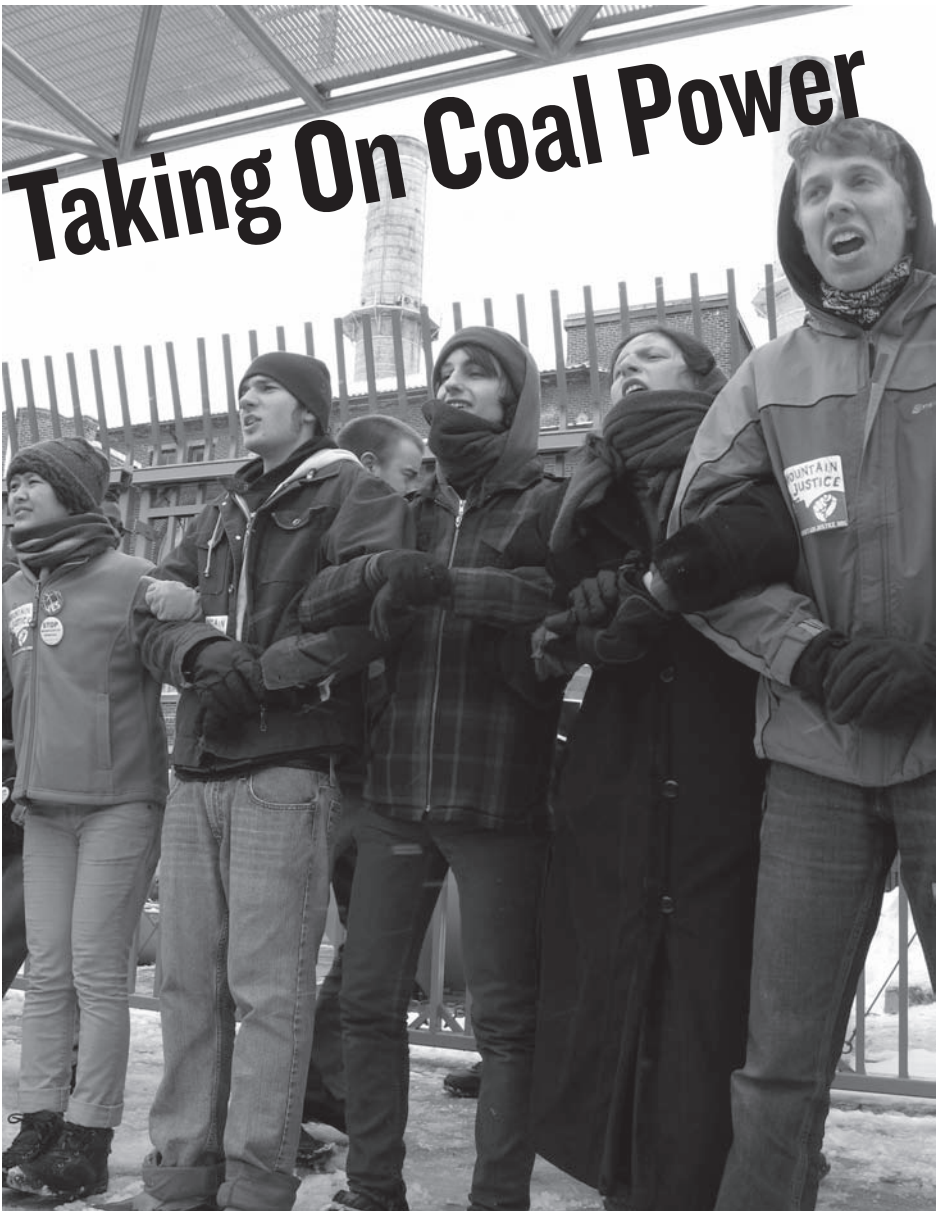
Recently, the University of Texas asked faculty members to answer in 300 words or less the question, “What is the most important challenge facing women in the 21st century, and why?” for its online “Many Voices of Feminism” collection. This is what journalism professor Robert Jensen had to say.

Given the disastrous consequences of the human assault on the ecosystem that makes our lives possible, the most important 21st-century challenge for women is the same as for men: Can we change the way we organize ourselves socially, politically and economically in time to reverse this ecological collapse? Can we learn to live in sustainable balance with the non-human world so that we might make it to the end of the 21st century with our humanity intact?

In facing these social, political and economic challenges, I believe women have a crucial contribution to make through feminism. My own intellectual and political development is rooted in the feminism I learned from women, both in the classroom and community. Much of my work has addressed men’s use and abuse of women and their sexuality in the sexual-exploitation industries: prostitution, stripping and pornography. But from those women I also learned that feminism was not merely a concern for “women’s issues” but also a way of understanding power and critiquing the domination/subordination dynamic that is central to so much of modern life. The roots of that dynamic are in patriarchy, the system of male dominance that arose only a few thousand years ago, but that has been so destructive to people and the earth. Patriarchy is incompatible with justice and sustainability.

The challenge for feminism is to articulate an alternative to the illegitimate hierarchies that structure our lives: men over women, white over non-white, rich over poor, First World over Third. That isn’t “women’s work” but “feminism’s work,” which we all should undertake, in conjunction with the many other intellectual and political movements concerned with real justice. If we can change the way we treat each other, those new non-hierarchical social arrangements may help us solve the fundamental problem of the destruction inherent in human domination over the non-human world.

Robert Jensen is the author of *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity* (South End Press, 2007) and *All My Bones Shake: Seeking a Progressive Path to the Prophetic Voice* (Soft Skull Press, June 2009).



BY JESSICA LEE

The movement to shut down the coal industry is not waiting for Congress or Barack Obama.

Environmental and human rights groups from around the United States say they will attempt to target coal-fired power plants and coal mining every day of the first 100 days of the Obama administration. The Power Past Coal Project is uniting organizations from across the country in order to “amplify the message” that the United States “needs to move past coal power.” Climate scientists say that burning coal is the greatest contributor to global warming.

The group Asheville Rising Tide is planning a non-violent direct action against Duke Energy’s new Cliffside coal-fired power plant by protesting at the company’s headquarters in Charlotte, N.C., on Earth Day April 20, a power plant the group believes would emit six million tons of carbon dioxide a year.

Fourteen anti-coal activists were arrested in Knoxville, Tenn., March 14 as they participated in a “die-in” in front of the Tennessee Valley Authority’s (TVA) headquarters to show solidarity with the victims of the recent coal ash disaster at a TVA coal plant. In West Virginia, five activists were arrested Mar. 5 while protesting near a mountaintop removal coal strip mine operated by Massey Energy.

The largest anti-coal protest in history occurred in Washington, D.C., Mar. 2 when an estimated 3,000 people engaged in civil disobedience against a coal-fired power plant located just blocks from Capitol Hill. Protesters included leading climate activist Bill McKibben and NASA climatology expert James Hansen. Hundreds of people — mostly student activists — locked arms and blocked several gates around the Capitol Power Plant, a facility that emits 60,000 tons of carbon dioxide emissions annually from burning coal,

natural gas and fuel oil.

“I cannot talk about the problem and let the young people get arrested without me standing there,” Hansen said. “The young people are absolutely right. This is the time to send a message to the new administration that we want this problem solved. We need to phase coal out in the next two decades.”

The protest was organized by Capitol Climate Action, a coalition of more than 90 groups. Although the action was largely symbolic — the plant continued to operate despite the protest — Capitol Climate Action stated that it hopes the event will just be the first in a massive movement of people taking on the more than 600 coal-fired power plants in the nation.

Organizers won a partial victory days before the protest began when House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) released a letter directing the Capitol Power Plant to switch to natural gas by the end of 2009, which still emits about half the carbon dioxide as coal per unit of energy, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

“We see that Congress is willing to get coal out of their backyard,” said Nell Greenburg, communications manager with the Rainforest Action Network. “Let’s see if [they] can get the industry out of their back pocket.”

The March 2 protest occurred as more than 12,000 college and high school students gathered in Washington for the Power Shift 2009 conference to pressure Congress for more funds for clean energy and green jobs.

“Power Shift has been a really eye-opening experience,” said Ashley Fallon, 20, a marketing student from Loyola College in

THE HEAT IS ON: Anti-coal climate activists lock arms to symbolically shut down Capitol Power Plant March 2, a power plant just blocks from Capitol Hill. PHOTO: JESSICA LEE

Maryland.

Energy Action, a coalition of 50 environmental groups, organized the Power Shift conference and the 350 meetings for youth to lobby members of Congress in what was described as “the largest-ever lobby day on climate change and energy.”

Roshi Lawrence, a 20-year-old Marquette University student, traveled from Milwaukee, Wisc., to D.C. to encourage Obama to take action. Holding a sign that read, “Prove Us Right” underneath a painting of Obama’s campaign logo, Lawrence said, “Obama, during his campaign, tried to speak to us youth. Please Obama, get what you said done.” Lawrence said that he took time away from school last year to canvas and phone bank for the Obama campaign.

During the three-day Power Shift conference, students attended workshops and panel discussions ranging in themes from the histories of coal power, direct action and uranium mining, to media and leadership training, grassroots organizing and anti-oppression workshops. The conference also gave activists and groups a chance to discuss strategy around how to build a political movement to confront climate change.

“You have come here to have a voice about the environment. Our ancestors have been telling the government for 200 years to protect the environment,” said Travis Brown, a student at Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence, Kan., to a room of more than 200 students who attended a workshop titled, “Decolonizing Our Minds: How Colonization Affects Us Today.” Brown noted that native communities across the continent are being adversely impacted not only by mineral and fuel extraction companies, but are also suffering the effects of climate change on the landscape and eco-systems. “Our people are at the risk of being exterminated.”

Many students were moved by stories brought from people across the continent who discussed the effects of industrialization, capitalism and colonization in their communities, including high cancer rates, demolished mountains, polluted streams, radioactive mines, toxic dumps and changes in local flora and fauna.

Representatives from Arctic indigenous communities explained how the effects of climate change are more extreme at the earth’s poles and how they threaten their way of life because of melting sea ice, eroding shorelines, thawing tundra and shifts in fish, seal, whale and caribou migrations.

Marshall University student Heather Sprouse, 19, was deeply moved by the stories told by Rosemary Ahtuanguak, an Inupait community health advocate, and Faith Gemmill, a renewable energy leader in the Gwich’in town of Arctic Village, Alaska. Both women told detailed accounts of increases in asthma and the loss of fish due to off-shore oil drilling.

“I didn’t know much about this topic before today,” Sprouse said. But she felt that the stories from communities in Alaska related to her experience in her home state of West Virginia, a state that has been deeply impacted by generations of coal mining and, more recently, the devastation of mountaintop removal coal mining.

“Personally I am interested in cultural preservation,” Sprouse said. “We are not able to farm, to make music any more due to the coal industry. ... The people in my community are sick and they are tired. I don’t know what else to call it but cultural genocide.”

Moving On From War

By ANTHONY ARNOVE

On March 2, the liberal organization MoveOn.org — known for mobilizing opposition to the Bush administration through the Internet — sent an email to its membership that declared the U.S. war on Iraq effectively over:

Dear MoveOn member,
“I’m sure you’ve heard about President Obama’s plan to finally bring an end to the disastrous war in Iraq. It will bring most of our troops home by August of next year — and by the end of 2011 there won’t be any more troops left in Iraq. This is a major turning point in the fight to end the war.

We wanted to take a moment to reflect on the work that you’ve done over the last six, dark years ... to thank you, sincerely, for all you have done...

This war is coming to an end in part because of the work you did.”

While the letter acknowledges that “our troops aren’t home yet. Hundreds of thousands of them are still in harm’s way, and will continue to be for longer than any of us would like,” it says the bottom line is that “now there’s a date certain for them to come home.”

Reading this, I was reminded of the final line of Ernest Hemingway’s novel *The Sun Also Rises*: “Isn’t it pretty to think so?”

But MoveOn is not alone. Much of the antiwar movement has folded up its tents. The Iraq War has more or less dropped out of popular consciousness altogether. And the media report less and less about the ongoing problems there.

So it’s no surprise that the fine print of President Barack Obama’s plan in Iraq has gone largely unexamined.

Rather than pulling all U.S. troops out of Iraq within 16 months, as most Obama voters understood his campaign pledge, the re-deployment of forces from Iraq will proceed over a 19-month period and will be back-loaded to take place after December 2009. As the *New York Times* reported Feb. 26:

The plan would maintain relatively high troop levels through Iraq’s parliamentary elections, to be held in December, before beginning in earnest to meet the August 2010 target for removing combat forces, the officials said. Even after August 2010, as many as 50,000 of the 142,000 troops now in Iraq would remain, including some combat units reassigned as “Advisory Training Brigades” or “Advisory Assistance Brigades,” the administration and Pentagon officials said.

Obama’s plan says nothing about the private contractors and mercenaries that are an essential part of the occupation of Iraq, and whose numbers may even be increased to cover functions previously provided by active-duty troops. And it will leave in place the world’s largest foreign embassy, as well as the largest CIA foreign station, in Baghdad.

Obama calls the troops who will stay in Iraq through the end of 2011 “residual forces” and non-combat troops, but this is just doublespeak. Combat troops are simply being renamed non-combat troops through a verbal sleight of hand, but will certainly be able to use lethal force and will find themselves in combat situations.

And in accepting the logic of the Bush ad-

ministration for not withdrawing the troops immediately — that they are needed to fight al-Qaeda, engage in “counter-insurgency operations,” and continue the “war on terror” — Obama has opened the door to keeping them in Iraq beyond 2011.

Indeed, in his speech about the Iraq “withdrawal” plan at the end of February, Obama retroactively endorsed the Bush administration’s stated reasons for invading Iraq in the first place, as the *Wall Street Journal* gleefully noted.

We know that Iraq will remain under occupation until at least the end of 2011, but there is very good reason to believe that between now and then, the Iraqi government, which owes its survival to Washington, will cut a deal to allow U.S. forces to remain longer. Such an agreement would also likely give the U.S. long-term access to military bases and access to Iraqi air space.

The fact remains that Iraq is a fulcrum of geopolitics and a vital front for U.S. military strategy in the Middle East. Washington’s goals for Iraq and the region may be less ambitious than when the Bush administration launched its 2003 invasion, but no one is reversing the fundamental policies driving U.S. policy: the goal of controlling the region’s vast energy resources and being the hegemonic foreign power there.

MoveOn should be letting its members know this — and urging far more than to “keep watching Washington” to be sure they do bring the troops home. But to do this, the group would have to take on the Obama administration more forcefully on Iraq — and



JOB INCOMPLETE: Antiwar activists with MoveOn.org July 17, 2007. The liberal organization believes the Iraq War will so be over and refuses to oppose the surge of U.S. troops in Afghanistan. PHOTO: MOVEON.ORG

on the occupation of Afghanistan, which is intimately related.

Obama has said all along that he sees Afghanistan as the “central front” in the “war on terror,” and that he would commit more troops to the war there. But Justin Ruben, MoveOn’s new executive director, told *Nation* correspondent Ari Melber Feb. 27 that the organization did not intend to oppose Obama’s plan to send more troops to Afghanistan.

The message being sent to the antiwar movement is: It’s over. We can “move on.” Leave it to the generals to wind it down. But if we do that, we will find ourselves without the forces we need to challenge Obama and Congress.

The year 2011 is already too late to end the occupation of Iraq, which should never

have started in the first place. And shifting troops from Iraq to Afghanistan is not ending the war.

Without an antiwar movement that is loud, active, in the streets and raising its own independent demands beyond the limits set by the Democratic Party, U.S. troops will not be coming home.

The empire has not folded up its tent, and neither should we.

This article was originally published by Socialist Worker. Anthony Arnové is the author of Iraq: The Logic of Withdrawal and the coauthor, with Howard Zinn, of Voices of a People’s History of the United States.

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Bronx Bakery Battle

BY SARAH SECUNDA
PHOTOS BY JOEL COOK

Workers at the Stella D'oro cookie factory in the Bronx have emerged as symbols of working-class resistance during a time of economic crisis.

At Home At Work

Stella D'oro began as a family business in 1932 when Joseph Kresivich, a native of Trieste, Italy, opened the Stella D'oro Biscuit Co. at 237th Street and Broadway in the working-class Bronx neighborhood of Kingsbridge.

The factory has since become a landmark, well-known to locals for the sweet aromas it exudes and for the quality of the cookies and biscuits being baked within its walls by a dedicated staff.

Eddie Marrero, a foreman baker and employee of 29 years, describes Stella D'oro cookies as "traditional Italian." And its among tradition-minded consumers, particularly families and the elderly, says Marrero, that Stella D'oro breakfast treats, biscotti and breadsticks have found a loyal, nationwide market.

The workforce unionized in the 1950s with the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers, and Grain Millers International Union Local 50. Over the years, this affiliation has secured for Stella D'oro employees the benefits and the working conditions that made the factory a place where people wanted to work.

"That place was like our home," Marrero says. "You could eat on the floor because we took care of that place. You have family there — because that's what we consider ourselves: all family."

Things began to change at Stella D'oro in 1992 when the Kresivich family sold the business to Nabisco. The company was then acquired by Kraft Foods, Inc. in 2000. In 2006, saying that it wanted to "better focus its brand portfolio," Kraft sold Stella D'oro to Brynwood Partners, the private equity firm headquartered in Greenwich, Conn.

—S.S.

When the 136 factory workers at the Stella D'oro Biscuit Co. in the Bronx went on strike Aug. 13, they didn't expect to be out on the street for long. Evelyn Rivera, who had only been at Stella D'oro since August 2007, recalls the reassurances she received from some of the factory's older hands. "Maybe five weeks," they told her.

The strike had been launched to protest, among other concessions, wage cuts of up to 26 percent demanded by Brynwood Partners, the private equity firm that purchased Stella D'oro from Kraft Foods, Inc. in 2006.

Declaring Brynwood's terms unacceptable, the workers set up a 24-hour picket line outside the factory gates at 237th Street and Broadway that by their own account better resembled a neighborhood party than a scene of dissent.

"We used to barbecue every night for the people," says Stella D'oro employee Mike Filippou.

But as weeks on the picket line turned into months, the Stella D'oro strikers began to realize that they had underestimated Brynwood's unyieldingness.

"In the summer, we didn't know better," Filippou concedes. "We wasted a lot of time."

The stakes abruptly became apparent when, a month into the strike, the bottom fell out of the U.S. economy and nationwide unemployment soared. As longtime Stella D'oro employee Emelia Dorsu puts it, "Right now you can't even find a job."

But far from cowed by the odds they face, after seven months on the picket line, the Stella D'oro strikers have mounted an energetic campaign that has been boosted by outside support. In the process, they have emerged as representatives of a larger struggle escalating between labor and management as the economy continues to spiral downward.

"[Business owners] are going to start to use

the recession to take back wages and benefits, so I think people should resist," Filippou says. As he sees it, the Stella D'oro strikers "are making the beginning for other people to start resisting."

A NEW BUSINESS MODEL

As a workers' representative to the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers, and Grain Millers (BCTGM) International Union Local 50, Mike Filippou had already been through two sets of contract negotiations when he and other union officials sat down with representatives from Brynwood in late May 2008 to negotiate a new contract for the Stella D'oro workers. He expected the meeting to follow the model of past negotiations: "You give me this, I give you that."

Instead, Filippou says, "as soon as they get to the table, the company gives the union reps a big presentation about how bad the company is doing, how many millions they are losing. I was ready to cry."

A lawyer from Brynwood then rolled out a proposal that divided the Stella D'oro workforce into two camps, the skilled and the non-skilled. Among the skilled the company

counted the factory's mechanics, electricians, foremen and mixers. Among the non-skilled were the sanitation workers and cookie packers, who comprise more than 60 percent of the workforce. While the wages of the skilled would remain intact, from the salary of the so-called non-skilled, Brynwood wanted to subtract one dollar from the hourly wage each year for the next five years. Under this plan, workers who earned \$37,000 in 2007 would see their annual income drop to \$27,000 by 2012.

Brynwood's other proposals, which extended to the entire Stella D'oro workforce, included the elimination of overtime pay and all sick days, plus the loss of one week of va-

cation and four holiday days. Brynwood also wanted employees to pay for 20 percent of the cost of a company healthcare plan, whereas before the employees had paid nothing for health benefits.

Moreover, says Joyce Alston, Local 50 president, Brynwood rewrote "anything [in the contract] that gave members a sense of protection," including work rules and conditions of employment. "They would have a grievance procedure but it wouldn't be effective because the contract was saying that the company could change your schedule, change your job at will," a condition that would leave the workers at the mercy of management.

"You give that contract, you give your union," Filippou says.

According to Alston, the union requested a copy of Brynwood's financial records for an accountant to review in order to verify the company's claims. She says that Brynwood denied union reps a copy, informing them that they could access the financial records only at company headquarters, in Greenwich, Conn., where they would be allowed to sit and take notes.

Brynwood has not responded to repeated requests by *The Independent* for comment.

Weeks of haggling followed. Once it became apparent that Brynwood would not budge on its central demands, Stella D'oro workers voted unanimously to strike.

In September, Local 50 filed an Unfair Labor Practice with the National Labor Review Board (NLRB), the federal governmental agency charged with adjudicating labor disputes. As its central grievance Local 50 cited Brynwood's refusal to negotiate in good faith.

The company evidently recognized the value of some of its employees to the factory's operation. Filippou says that he and other "skilled" Stella D'oro workers were approached by

management in the weeks prior to the strike.

"They were betting on the skilled workers throwing the rest beneath the tracks," Filippou says.

Eddie Marrero, a Stella D'oro employee of 29 years, believes that Brynwood's assumption that it could divide the workforce reveals a fundamental difference between the private equity firm and the workers.

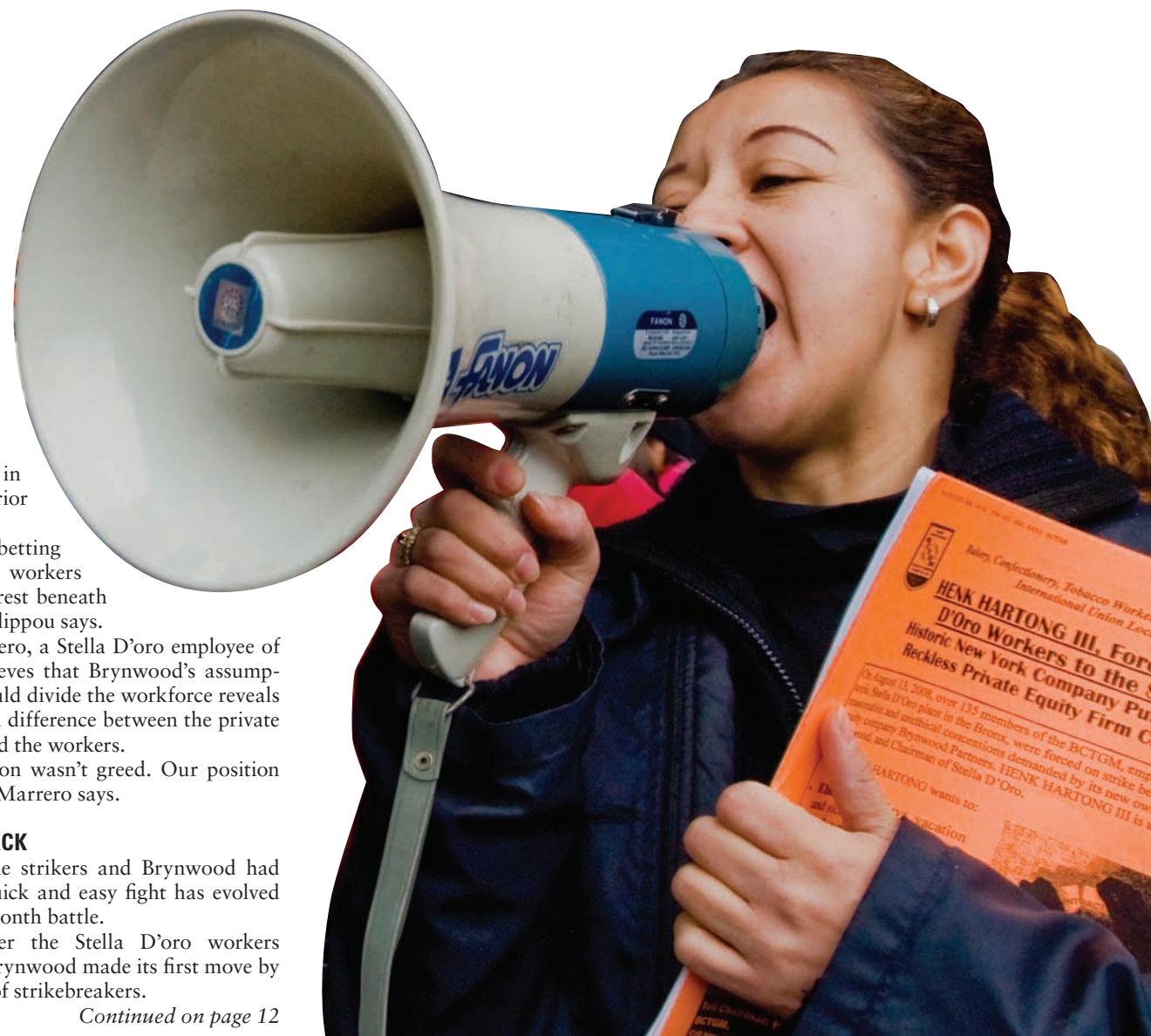
"Our position wasn't greed. Our position was respect," Marrero says.

STRIKING BACK

What both the strikers and Brynwood had supposed a quick and easy fight has evolved into a seven-month battle.

Shortly after the Stella D'oro workers walked out, Brynwood made its first move by hiring scores of strikebreakers.

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MOBILIZING MOM: Sara Rodriguez leads the charge on the Stella D'oro picket line.

The Women of Stella D'oro

The contract offered by Brynwood Partners divides the Stella D'oro Biscuit Co. workforce into two groups: the skilled and the non-skilled. The burden of this classification would primarily fall on the women who spend eight hours a day packing cookies, by all accounts a rigorous job.

"A lot of women inside, they're not the same as when they started," says Evelyn Rivera. "They are always in pain."

Rivera came to Stella D'oro in August 2007 from an office job on Wall Street and says that she has since developed trigger finger, a debilitating hand condition.

Factory work represented a big change for Rivera, but the salary and benefits offered at Stella D'oro made the job attractive to her, particularly as a single mother of two. "Nowadays it's very hard to find a good job money-wise. I had the opportunity here, so I took it."

Under the Brynwood plan, a employee earning \$18 an hour would see \$1 taken from her wages each year for the next five years. The cut would reduce a 2007 annual income of \$37,000 to \$27,000 by 2012. On top of this, Brynwood wants employees to pay for 20 percent of the cost of a company healthcare plan, whereas before employees had paid nothing for health benefits.

FIGHT FOR YOUR RIGHTS

Like Rivera and many other women in the packing department, Sara Rodriguez is a single mother.

"Whenever I work, I can always say that I give my best," says Rodriguez, 41. "And I always used to think, thanks to this job, I could raise my kids."

DETERMINED: On strike for seven months, Stella D'oro employees Sara Rodriguez (left) and Emelia Dorsu (right) are standing up to wage and benefit cuts demanded by private equity firm Brynwood Partners.

If the strikers don't return to the factory, Rodriguez expects she will have to find two full-time jobs in order to support her family — a bleak prospect in a crumbling economy.

Laughing, Rodriguez admits she had never heard of a picket line prior to joining one seven months ago. Now she is one of several strikers who makes sure to attend every meeting of the strike support group, the Committee in Support of the Stella D'oro Strikers.

"We are trying to get informed," Rodriguez explains. "We're getting a lot of support from all of these people that come to the meetings."

Emelia Dorsu, 57, who worked with Rodriguez on the over-night packing shift, agrees. "There's a big movement out there that will feel for you, that will support you, that will help you through hard times."

In recent months, Rodriguez and Dorsu have begun to speak about the Stella D'oro strike at forums and rallies organized by labor groups in the city. Both women consider these events a chance to raise awareness about the strike as well as an opportunity to contribute to the much larger battle facing working people across this country.

"It's not only us," Dorsu is careful to point out. "The reason why I am trying to learn a lot of things is so that even if I cannot help myself right now, I can help others going through this."

For the working women and men in a situation like her own, Rodriguez has strong words. "Fight to the end," she says. "Don't let these people take advantage of you. Don't let them come and destroy your life."

—S.S.



'I've Been a Fighter All My Life'

Mike Filippou seems most at home when he is among his colleagues on the picket line. He wears his position as a workers' representative to the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers, and Grain Millers International Union Local 50 as a natural extension of himself.

"I've been a fighter all my life," says Filippou, 44. "When it comes to peoples' rights, I go all the way."

Filippou grew up on the small Greek island of Kasos, population 1,500.

"I came here for the American dream," he chuckles. "I see my brothers in the old country, and they live better than me now!"

Bad timing and management greed have worked against Filippou during his 23 years in the United States.

Filippou's first state-side job came with Farberware, the Bronx-based cookware manufacturer, where he worked for more than nine years. He was six months short of qualifying for a pension when the company gave him one-month's notice that it would be moving all operations overseas to India and Indonesia.

After he turned down Farberware's offer to train workers in Indonesia to perform his job, Filippou migrated to Stella D'oro, where he has worked as a lead maintenance mechanic for the past 14 years.

At Stella D'oro, pensions are awarded according to a rule called the Golden 80, for which an employee must put in a minimum of 15 years at the company to qualify. Filippou was one year from securing a pension this past August when he cast his lot with his colleagues and voted to strike. If the Stella D'oro workers lose their jobs at the factory, Filippou will find himself back at square one.

"I'm really pissed with them," he says of Brynwood Partners, the private equity firm that owns Stella D'oro. "I don't want to drive a Rolls Royce. I don't want to have a mansion. Just give me a decent living."

But Filippou is quick to note that he, as a mechanic in his prime, will be able to find some other form of work. He says he's angriest about the fate of those he feels have been left in the lurch.

"We have ladies who are 50, 55, 60 years old, and the only thing they do in their lives, they pack cookies," Filippou says. "Where are they gonna go to find these people a job? They lose their benefits, they lose everything. What they gonna do?"

Mike Filippou speaks not only for those whom he defends when he remarks, "You give your life and get nothing in return."

—S.S.



PUSH BACK: Members of the Committee in Support of the Stella D'oro Strikers try to prevent strikebreakers from entering the Bronx-based factory March 11.



Stella D’oro Strike Supporters Take Action

Continued from page 11

Local 50 responded to Brynwood maneuvers with a call to boycott Stella D’oro “scab cookies.”

Beyond the boycott, the union believed it had few options other than to wait for the NLRB ruling, which stood to prevent Brynwood from hiring strikebreakers as permanent replacement workers.

“The union is fighting the legal battle,” says Local 50 President Alston. “Other than that, your hands are kind of tied.”

Since August, the Stella D’oro strikers have squeaked by on a weekly income of \$105 from their union strike fund and an unemployment check, to which they are legally entitled due to Brynwood’s hiring of strikebreakers. The strikers’ unemployment benefits will expire this August.

The Stella D’oro workers entered their fifth month on the picket line with the realization that they could not rely upon a creeping legal process. This realization came to a head at the end of December when

community members joined with strikers to organize a more energetic and aggressive counter-attack. The fruit of this collaboration has been the Committee in Support of the Stella D’oro Strikers.

Judy Sheridan-Gonzalez, a nurse and long-time member of the New York State Nurses Association, describes the Committee as a coalition of diverse individuals, many affiliated with other unions or various left-wing activist groups.

“Different people were doing different things to help [the strikers],” says Sheridan-Gonzalez. “Then some of us said, ‘We need to do this together.’”

What began with one meeting at a McDonald’s has now evolved into weekly meetings during which strikers and community members sit down together to hash out a strategy.

The support group produces and distributes fliers, calls press conferences, organizes rallies, raises money for the Local 50 strike

fund, and reaches out to other unions and labor groups.

One of the Committee’s campaigns aims to bring the Stella D’oro boycott to the attention of retailers by sending out teams to petition store managers to pull Stella D’oro products from the shelf.

According to Stella D’oro supporter Michah Landau, the strike committee has focused most of its energies of late on Fairway. Landau says the Committee is also targeting several larger grocery store chains including Stop & Shop and Food Emporium

In this and other ways, strike support committees, which have not been prevalent since the 1930s, can sidestep the legal obstacles which so often stop more aggressive actions by unions and their members.

But not all Stella D’oro strikers have jumped on board. Indeed, far more strikers do not attend Committee meetings than do.

While Sheridan-Gonzalez cites a suspicion of outsiders as one factor contributing to low-involvement, striker Emelia Dorsu points to another reason.

“I think that when this first started, we thought it was just us. It was our problem and we have to solve it,” Dorsu says. “I didn’t know that there’s a lot of support and solidarity out there. I didn’t know that people care so much about other people. I didn’t. Until I started getting involved and going out.”

On March 5, Dorsu and the rest of the Stella D’oro strikers took a break from the picket line and headed to City Hall in order to participate in a giant rally organized by a number of New York City union locals to protest state budget cuts threatening public sector workers.

The strikers, who have received various levels of support from many unions — including the Professional Staff Congress, United Federation of Teachers, Service Employees International Union and the Transit Workers — came to the rally bearing a message of solidarity.

“When you go out there and you see all those people fighting for the same cause,” Dorsu says, “[you] feel a part of something that can make change, that can benefit people.”

Two weeks after the City Hall rally, the NLRB issued a preliminary ruling in the Unfair Labor Practice filed by Local 50



A FAMILY AFFAIR: A Stella D’oro striker (center) and her two kids march in a rally in the Bronx Jan. 31. PHOTO: SARAH SECUNDA

in September that found in the union’s favor. The case will go to a NLRB hearing in April.

Citing the possibility of a Brynwood appeal, Local 50 President Joyce Alston calls the labor board’s ruling “a step in the right direction,” but cautions “the battle’s not over by any means.”

It’s a battle that Alston considers “representative of the entire country in terms of working men and women.”

“What we’re giving is an example,” says Stella D’oro striker Eddie Marrero. “You gotta hold your ground no matter what, and take pride in yourself and don’t let nobody come in here and say, ‘You don’t deserve this. You make too much for what you do.’”

“This is where you let them know: I am a human being working for a living,” Marrero says.

Joel Cook contributed additional reporting for this article.

For more information about the Stella D’oro strike and how to get involved, visit stelladorostrike2008.com.

Brynwood Partners: Playing for Profit

Private equity firms typically acquire a company they deem to be “under-performing” or “under-valued” and implement a strategy of infusing capital while cutting costs with the goal of eventually selling the company for a profit.

For Greenwich-based private equity firm Brynwood Partners, Stella D’oro was one such underperformer. Even though Stella D’oro was a subsidiary of Kraft Foods, Inc., it was languishing. So Brynwood acquired it in 2006 based on a model of increasing its market share.

While Brynwood invested in new product packaging and opened lucrative accounts with national retailers such as Costco and Wal-Mart, it also pushed for productivity increases.

“After Brynwood took over, there was a lot more pressure,” says Sara Rodriguez, a supervisor in the Stella D’oro packing department. “People would retire. They wouldn’t replace the people. So we would have to do extra work. They wanted to get the same production with less people.”

Joyce Alston, president of the union local that represents the Stella D’oro strikers, says that within a year of buying Stella D’oro, Brynwood

hired private contractors to replace the factory’s unionized delivery truck drivers.

Alston sees this as part of the company’s “bottom-line” mentality. “The company understands dollars and cents ... It’s about flipping [the business] over for a profit.”

Stella D’oro strikers claim Brynwood wants to get rid of a union that provides a living wage, good benefits and safe working conditions to all of its members.

Eddie Marrero, a foreman baker at the plant, says the union provides “decent jobs in New York City for people who don’t have degrees from college.” But he says Brynwood is “coming in here and taking these decent-paying jobs and trying to drag these jobs through the dirt.”

Mark Brenner, the East Coast director of Labor Notes, considers the Stella D’oro strike “a textbook case of everything that’s wrong with our current economy.”

“Let’s hope this economic crisis closes the book on the 30-year working-class squeeze,” Brenner says. “But as tough as [these times] are, I don’t think that will happen without more strikes like Stella D’oro.” —S.S.

Indydependent Coordinator

Continued from page 3

“John helped me find my voice as a young journalist and, in some ways, offered more guidance than my media studies professors at Hunter [College],” said Sarah Stuteville, who volunteered with *The Indydependent* from 2003 to 2005 and went on to found The Common Language Project, a non-profit multimedia production house that reports on under-reported social justice issues worldwide. “He convinced me that journalism doesn’t have to be a career solely for elite Ivy Leaguers, but that anyone who really cares about the issues in their world can wade into the fray and pull out great stories.”

Ana Nogueira, the newspaper’s founder, says that Tarleton gave everything to the project. “When the newspaper had no money to pay him, he slept in a 3-by-8-foot storage closet in the back of the old office

on East 29th Street with cracks in the walls that let the freezing cold air in at night,” Nogueira remembered. “He dumpstered for food while producing some of the best reporting this city has seen. His tirelessness has inspired hundreds of others to produce the same kind of quality reporting that deals with real life issues people in this city face every day.”

It’s this kind of reporting that has helped *The Indydependent* win more awards from the New York City Community Media Alliance for journalistic excellence than any other paper in the city five out of the past six years.

“I have never been around a group that works so hard and does so much with so little as *The Indydependent*,” Tarleton said. “The faces change but the kind of people who are working on *The Indydependent* in 2009 are just as amazing as those who were involved in 2001 or any time since.”

One of his best memories is of the paper’s early staff who virtually camped out at the office for 48 hours after the Sept. 11 attacks to publish the first of several special issues.

“The newspaper was only four pages but it covered so much important ground — including the possibility of endless war, attacks on civil liberties, harassment of immigrant communities and the role of the media plus deeply moving first-person accounts from Ground Zero,” Tarleton said. “It struck such a different tone from every other paper in the city. We rose to the occasion and have never stopped since.”

The Indydependent continues to be a labor of love produced by a tiny full-time staff and dozens of volunteers who do all the writing, photography, illustration, design, ad sales and distribution.

Publishing a feisty independent newspaper during a severe recession and in this moment of crisis for journalism will be a

tremendous challenge.

“Building a broad sustainer base is key. *The Indydependent* is an unique community institution whose long-term strength and viability ultimately depends on its volunteers and readers. If we all get behind it, the newspaper will flourish for many years to come.”

To read more about the history of The Indydependent, to sign up as a monthly sustainer and to learn how to get involved, visit indydependent.org.

The Indydependent *collective wishes John the best on his new job. Thank you for all you have done during the past eight years!*

The Great Unraveling

By Arun Gupta

The rate of the decline is astonishing. Nouriel Roubini, a.k.a. “Dr. Doom,” writes, “The scale and speed of synchronized global economic contraction is really unprecedented (at least since the Great Depression), with a free fall of GDP, income, consumption, industrial production, employment, exports, imports, residential investment and, more ominously, capital expenditures around the world.”

During the Great Depression the global economy fragmented, leading to the rise of competing power blocs. Eventually, fascist Germany and imperial Japan launched wars of conquest for new markets and lands because they lacked the territorial and trade outlets possessed by the United States, England and the Soviet Union.

This crisis is at an early stage, but the process of global fragmentation has already begun, which means a greater likelihood of interstate military conflict. With the fading of the “war on terror” as the central U.S. battleground, China will probably return as the pre-eminent peril in the minds of the U.S. economic and political elite.

Recently, a sea-going confrontation and China’s lecturing the United States over debt indicates how the powers are skirmishing over military and economic interests.

CHINA RISING

China is using the economic crisis as an opportunity by dipping into its gargantuan cash reserves to stoke demand with a two-year stimulus plan of \$586 billion, which amounts to 14 percent of its annual gross domestic product, versus the Obama plan, which at \$797 billion is less than 6 percent of U.S. GDP.

China is focusing on improving its industrial competitiveness, but has yet to address its minimal social welfare spending, which provides greater stimulus than infrastructure spending and spurs demand by allowing the Chinese to lower their high savings rate.

The bigger problem is the Asian economic model may be finished, with exports declining 33 percent in South Korea, where exports account for 60 percent of GDP, and 46 percent in Japan. Industrial output has dropped 43 percent in Taiwan. With consumer demand and business investment collapsing worldwide, countries can no longer export their way to recovery (a policy known as export-oriented industrialization).

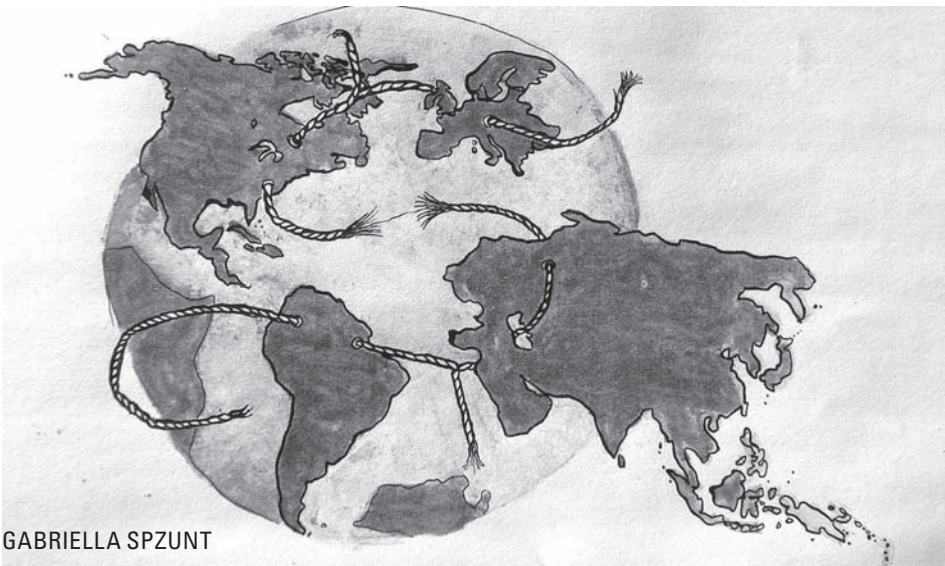
These export drops are showing up in China, where imports have declined significantly. It plays a critical intermediary role in the global economy. Walden Bello describes China’s economy as the “overwhelming driver of export growth in Taiwan and the Philippines and the majority buyer of products from Japan, South Korea, Malaysia and Australia.”

Even if China can spur domestic demand, it’s not a long-term solution. Production can’t survive on internal demand alone, and prioritizing domestic manufacturing over foreign trade inevitably devolves into “beggar-thy-neighbor” economic warfare.

EUROPE’S SWAN SONG?

This is precisely what’s happening in the 27-member European Union, where “peripheral states such as Latvia, Bulgaria and even Ireland have been brutally whipsawed from an era of heady growth to shockingly fast decline,” according to the *Wall Street Journal*.

The crisis threatens to unravel the post-Cold War economic order in which the West administered “shock therapy” to former



GABRIELLA SPZUNT

Soviet Bloc countries by restructuring them along neoliberal lines. Twenty years ago, Soviet Bloc populations largely accepted the shock therapy with passivity, disoriented by the rapid collapse of Communism.

Peter Gowan, author of *The Global Gamble*, argues that the Western-imposed shock therapy in the early 1990s bankrupted and privatized East Europe’s industrial enterprises and dismantled the region’s integrated economy, known as Comecon. This paved the

A feedback loop of more pressure on Europe’s weaker economies, the growth of radical political movements on the left and right and perhaps the eventual disintegration of the Europe’s common market and currency.

way for unsustainable bubbles in housing and construction, foreign credit and capital flows, low-wage manufacturing and remittances.

Central and East European (CEE) countries are dependent on exporting to meet Eurozone demand, which has collapsed. Net private capital inflows are expected to drop in the region by almost 90 percent this year to just \$30 billion. Remittances, which account for 2.5 percent of Poland’s GDP and 8 percent of Ukraine’s GDP, are evaporating as migrant workers head back home jobless.

Germany and France are telling Eastern countries to look to the International Monetary Fund for help. While European institutions are giving East Europe the cold shoulder, offering only \$30 billion in financing assistance for banks in Eastern Europe, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is planning to double its \$250 billion fund “to fight the financial crisis in emerging markets,” according to the *Financial Times*.

THE IMF RETURNS

Neoliberalism has led to a historic crisis and been discredited as a political ideology and economic program, but international institutions like the IMF that enforce neoliberal policies are implementing a new phase of structural adjustment programs that will make weaker economies pay for the excesses of Western capital.

The IMF is disbursing loans while instituting new regimes of shock therapy to countries that include Hungary, Iceland, Latvia, Serbia and Ukraine.

Analyst Adam Hanieh writes: “The conditions that come with this latest round of IMF lending have been particularly opaque. ...

Hungary has agreed to cuts in welfare spending, a freeze in salaries and canceling bonuses for public sector workers yet the final details have not been made public. Iceland was required to raise interest rates to 18 percent with the economy predicted to contract by 10 percent and inflation reaching 20 percent.”

West Europe, meanwhile, is turning inward. In England protests are increasing against foreign investment and the 2.4 million foreign workers in the country. Xenophobia and economic nationalism will likely rise as unemployment does across the continent. More joblessness and bankruptcies will increase pressure by labor and capital for protectionist measures ranging from supporting domestic industries and more national stimulus plans to forcing out foreign workers and passing “buy national” provisions.

The effect could lead to greater pressure on Europe’s weaker economies, the growth of radical political movements on the left and right and perhaps the eventual disintegration of the Europe’s common market and currency. Already, large-scale protests or riots having occurred in Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Iceland, Ukraine and Greece.

RUSSIA LOOKS EAST

Russia would like to benefit from the turmoil both as a response to 20 years of U.S. policy to encircle it militarily and economically and out of rising nationalism. But its economy has been bloodied over the last year. The ruble, Russian stock market and oil and natural gas prices have all tanked, draining away \$200 billion in the government’s hard currency reserves. Nonetheless, Russia will probably gain leverage over littoral states like the Ukraine and the Baltic region and Ukraine because of their lack of options.

Russia is trying to promote greater regionalization, and has cast its eyes east as part of this strategy. President Dmitry Medvedev predicted last November that “the high human and technological potential” of Asian-Pacific countries “will become the locomotive of sustainable world economic development in the future.” Recently, China inked a \$25 billion deal to aid Russia’s state-controlled energy

industry in exchange for about 100 million barrels of oil a year for 20 years. But this pact points to the limited role Russia plays in China’s economy, as a supplier of commodities and military hardware, while China exports more valuable consumer and industrial goods to Russia.

THE LATIN AMERICAN MODEL

As for Latin America, its 2.2 percent GDP growth from 2002 to 2006, the highest level since the 1960s, was fueled by exports, mainly commodities, and remittances, which accounted for \$59 billion or 2 percent of the continent’s GDP by 2006. With the contracting U.S. economy and plunging commodity prices, remittances and exports are falling quickly.

The difference in Latin America is the ascension of leftist governments in Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador that are forging new economic relations by “nationalizing natural resources and redistributing the subsequent wealth to social programs to benefit the countries’ poor majorities,” writes Benjamin Dangl, founder of the website *upsidedown-world.org*.

Venezuela is promoting the “Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas” (in opposition to the neoliberal Free Trade Area of the Americas) as a regional economic pact based on “cooperation and solidarity,” and which encompasses related agreements on energy, finance and media. It’s mostly been limited to technical cooperation, subsidized oil supplies and barter agreements, particularly in healthcare, which have proven effective and popular, but are a long way from creating a regional economy.

EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

Washington may look to Latin America as an outlet for capital expansion, such as with the Plan Puebla Panama, which has been in the works for a decade. Public funds and money from international institutions would be used to create an export-oriented industrial zone from southern Mexico through all of Central America.

These types of projects provide a “spatial fix” for capitalism by reorganizing new spaces that serve as sites where surplus capital (and labor) can be deployed as a way to alleviate crises of overproduction.

More ominously, Washington may seek to renew its imperial project in Latin America. Greg Grandin writes in *Empire’s Workshop* that the United States used Latin America historically as a “staging ground” for the “early push towards empire,” then as a school to study how to “execute imperial violence through proxies,” and most recently as a site for a resurgent “nationalist militarism” that began with the Central America wars of the Reagan presidency and culminated in the post-Sept. 11 wars.

Thus, given a declining economy and the need for domestic capital to find new markets, the United States may be tempted to use the Pentagon to launch adventurist wars in Latin America as a solution to its economic woes.

While many people fondly talk of a return to New Deal economics, it was World War II that pulled the U.S. economy out of the Great Depression. The solution to the global crisis requires restructuring economies to stimulate widespread demand while not feeding production and speculative bubbles, which means a redistribution of resources. Absent such measures, authoritarianism and militarism will have growing appeal. Just like the 1930s.

All Eyes on New Salvadoran President

By Roberto Lovato and Josue Rojas

On March 15, the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) became the first leftist party to clinch a presidential election in the history of El Salvador. By 10 p.m., it became clear to Salvadorans and to the world that the former guerrillas had ended more than 130 years of oligarchy and military rule over this Central American nation of seven million. In the streets, thousands of red-shirted sympathizers chanted “*¡Si Se Pudo!*” (“Yes, We Could”), while they celebrated the victory of the FMLN’s Mauricio Funes.

Funes captured 51 percent of the vote, to 49 percent cast for Rodrigo Avila of the Nationalist Republican Alliance party, which

had been in power for 20 years.

Though Funes, a former journalist, is the best-known Salvadoran on his country’s TV networks, he is little known outside the region. Thanks to a collaboration between *The Nation* and *New America Media*, reporters Roberto Lovato and Josue Rojas had the opportunity to interview El Salvador’s next president on the night of his election. What follows is an excerpt from this interview with Funes, who addressed numerous issues: the meaning of his presidency, El Salvador’s relationship with the United States, immigration and other domestic and foreign policy concerns.

Immigration has become one of the defining issues of the U.S.-El Salvador relationship. How

will your administration’s approach to this issue differ from that of the outgoing Saca administration?

MAURICIO FUNES: The fact that we’re going to rebuild the democratic institutions — enforce the constitution and make of El Salvador a democratic state that respects the rule of law — is the best guarantee to the United States that we will significantly reduce the flows of out-migration.

Salvadorans who leave to go to the United States do so because of the institutional abandonment, the lack of employment and dignified ways to make a living. This forces them to leave in search of new possibilities in the U.S. It’s not the same for us to ask the U.S. government to renew TPS [temporary legalization] without a Salvadoran effort to avoid further migration flows, and to do so from a position in which we have undertaken efforts to reduce the migration flows.

What’s the first message you’d like to send to President Obama?

MF: The message that I would like to send to President Obama is that I will not seek alliances or accords with other heads of state from the southern part of the continent who will jeopardize my relationship with the government of the United States.

Opinion polls in El Salvador indicate that large majorities of its citizens reject key policies that define, in many ways, the relationship between El Salvador and the United States, specifically CAFTA, dollarization and the Iraq war. What will your approach be to these issues?

MF: We can’t get mixed up in repealing CAFTA ... nor can we reverse dollarization, because that would send a negative message to foreign investors, and then we’d be facing serious problems because we wouldn’t have enough investment to stimulate the national economy.

What do you think the United States government should be concerned about with regard to El Salvador at this time?

MF: To the degree that we do our part, which is

to rebuild our productive capacity and to create a coherent social policy that improves the quality of life, there will be fewer reasons to leave for the U.S. and we’ll reduce migration flows. And that should be a concern for the U.S.

Where will the effects of the transition in power be felt most immediately?

MF: We’re going to change the way we make policy. And one of the most significant changes is that we will no longer have a government at the service of a privileged few. And we will no longer have a government that creates an economy of privileges for the privileged. Now, we need a government like the one envisioned by [Archbishop of El Salvador] Óscar Arnulfo Romero, who, in his prophetic message, said that the church should have a preferential option for the poor.

Paraphrasing Monseñor Romero, I would say that this government should have preferential option for the poor, for those who need a robust government to get ahead and to be able to compete in this world of disequilibrium under fair conditions.

This government implies a break from traditional policy-making.

Now, what we’re going to do is put the government and the structure of the state at the service of the Salvadoran people — the totality of the Salvadoran people — but fundamentally, of that great majority who are oppressed and excluded from the country’s social and economic development. [The people who for] not just the last 20 years, but for the last 200 years or more have not had the possibility of participating in the formation of public policies.

A government like the one I’m going to create will give them the protagonist’s role, which, until now, they have not had.

The article was originally published on newamericanmedia.org and thenation.com. Roberto Lovato, a frequent Nation contributor, is a New York-based writer with New America Media. Josue Rojas is a reporter for New America Media.



ABOUT TIME: Thousands of people celebrate the election of Mauricio Funes, the first leftist party president in the history of El Salvador. PHOTO: MALENA MAYORGA

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Obama's White Man's Burden

By JAISAL NOOR

After taking part in preparatory discussions, the Obama administration announced on Feb. 27 that it would boycott the U.N. World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance to be held in Geneva, Switzerland, April 20-24.

Also not participating are Canada, Italy and Israel, all close U.S. allies. Nonetheless, delegates from many nations are scheduled to meet in Geneva as a follow-up to the first conference, Durban I, held in Durban, South Africa, in September 2001.

The State Department said the United States was withdrawing because it objected to language affirming the Durban I conference call for reparations for slavery. The Department also stated that the conference “must not single out any one country or conflict.”

This statement is widely seen as referring to Israel. In 2001, the official U.S. delegation walked out of Durban I after a draft declaration included language referring to “ethnic cleansing of the Arab population in historic Palestine” and described Zionism as being “based on racial superiority.”

A revised draft was released on March 17 that removed references to Israel but as *The Independent* went to press the White House had not changed its position.

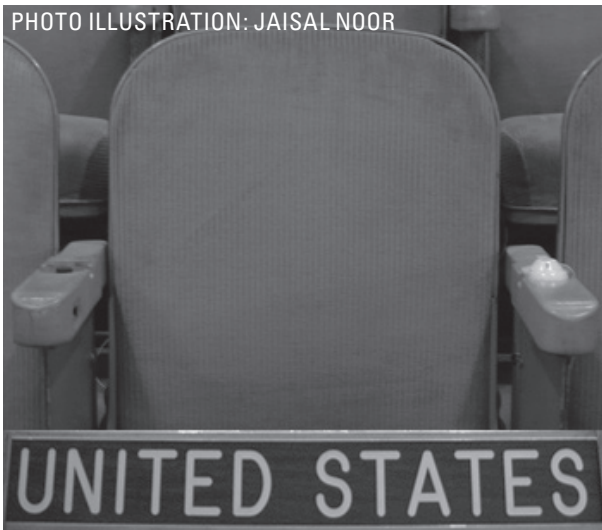
Lobbying against U.S. participation were pro-Israel groups, such as the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, which said, “President Obama’s decision not to send U.S. representation to the April event is the right thing to do and underscores America’s unstinting commitment to combating intolerance and racism in all its forms and in all settings.”

Many observers were critical of the U.S. withdrawal, however. Jared Ball, who sought the Green Party presidential nomination in 2008, told *The Independent* that the White House’s refusal to participate “is another in a series of acts which demonstrate [Obama is] an appointee of the most elite elements of this nation to re-brand a weakening U.S. empire.”

Nora Barrows-Friedman, co-host of Flashpoints on Pacifica radio, commented, “It is not surprising that the Obama administration is taking steps to distance itself from criticism at the Durban conference.” She said the U.S. withdrawal is a reaction to the “growing global outrage in civil society against both the United States’ entrenchment of its lethal occupations and wars against Iraq and Afghanistan and Israel’s expanding projects of occupation and genocidal actions in Palestine.”

Barrows-Friedman added, “Israel’s systematic racism against the indigenous, occupied and dispossessed people of Palestine continues to have the full support of the U.S. government.”

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: JAISAL NOOR



Over the last four decades, the United States has vetoed scores of U.N. resolutions regarding Israel, and Israel is currently in violation of at least 28 Security Council resolutions.

Recently, the president of the Israeli Association for Civil Rights said, “Israeli society is reaching new heights of racism that damages freedom of expression and privacy,” and last year the group reported that Israel’s occupation is “reminiscent of the apartheid regime in South Africa.”

Ball argues that even with a Black president, the United States is unable to come to terms with the legacy of slavery, colonialism or modern-day racism. Obama’s boycott, he said, “is further evidence of the fact of his blackness having nothing to do with his politics and less to do with his ability to articulate, defend or advance the causes and struggles of African-descended people here or abroad.”

The U.S. withdrawal is of significant concern because it is happening at a time when there is “exponential growth in hate crimes, ethnic tensions and other manifestations of ... racism,” according to journalist and analyst Roberto Lovato.

Within the United States, the Southern Poverty Law Center reports that the number of hate groups “continued to rise in 2008 and has grown by 54 percent since 2000 — an increase fueled last year by immigration fears, a failing economy and the successful campaign of Barack Obama.” The center also reports “a 40 percent growth in hate crimes against Latinos between 2003 and 2007.”

Another concern is racism within the U.S. prison system. One in every 31 adults, or 7.3 million people, are now in the US corrections system, and a disproportionate number are Latino and African-American. In a recent study titled “Decades of Disparity: Drug Arrests and Race in the United States,” Human Rights Watch documented the “structural racism” of the prison-industrial complex.

Ball asserts that because a “pro-Israeli lobby” was able to “influence a Black president out of a global conference against racism and out of an international discussion of reparations for enslavement ... only wide-ranging and well-organized social movements can produce the ‘change we can believe in,’ not marketing campaigns and well-crafted speeches.”

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A Look at Immigration Reform From Below

The Accidental American
BY RINKU SEN AND FEKKAK MAMDOUNH
BERRETT-KOEHLER PUBLISHERS, 2008

After Sept. 11, 2001, the immigration debate raging on in Washington took a turn for the worse. Immigrants were cast as a threat to national security, increasingly becoming associated with law-breakers, criminals and terrorists. The framework of immigration reform became one of enforcement and policing, evident through the passage of the USA PATRIOT Act and the creation of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security not to mention the renaming of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

Addressing the shift in the immigration debate post Sept. 11, *The Accidental American*, co-authored by Rinku Sen, publisher of *ColorLines* magazine, and Fekkak Mamdouh, is an ingenious amalgamation of personal narrative, historical context and thorough policy analysis.

Weaving in the history of neoliberal policies in third world countries, Sen and Mamdouh underscore the global movements that force people to migrate, defying the argument that immigration can be “fixed” by sheer enforcement.

In 2008, 345,710 immigrants were deported from the United States, nearly double the 195,000 deported in 2006. Yet mass deportations and workplace raids have done little to stem the large waves of immigration. Employ-

ing criminal tactics toward immigrant laborers has in fact perpetuated mistreatment and discrimination, encouraging the idea that civil and constitutional rights come only with citizenship.

The book tells the story of Mamdouh, a former employee at Windows on the World, the restaurant on the 107th floor of the World Trade Center. It traces his and his co-workers’ struggle trying to re-establish their lives in a post-9/11 society where anti-immigrant fervor was rampant. Their struggle culminates with the creation of the Restaurant Opportunity Center of New York (ROC-NY) founded by Mamdouh, who had worked with his union to provide temporary relief to the families of his 73 fallen co-workers, and Saru Jayaraman, an experienced organizer at the Workplace Project. ROC-NY’s series of campaigns against exploitative restaurant owners confronted the discriminatory and racial hierarchies rooted in much of restaurant industry culture — back-of-the-house employees tended to be immigrants and people of color, while front-of-the-house employees were mostly white.

The personal story of Mamdouh combats the xenophobic principle behind immigration policy — that immigrants threaten the authenticity of American culture. The growth of ROC-NY beyond an immigrant core to include native-born and white workers, shows that immigrants and native-born workers can be united through the collaborative struggle against systematic oppression.

The exploitation of immigrant laborers is a rallying point through which ROC-NY is able to challenge institutionalized labor practices. The inclusive nature of ROC-NY becomes a model to view immigration, yet the current debate remains narrowly focused on undocumented workers who need to be punished for “breaking the law.” *The Accidental American* challenges the notion of immigrants as the *mejicanos* working the back kitchens. Immigrants are not merely a static, sedentary workforce, but people who look for ways of political and social empowerment.

The Accidental American analyzes immigration on multiple levels, taking into account the geopolitical contexts that led to mass migrations, a facet largely ignored in mainstream accounts of immigration. Sen and Mamdouh contextualize migratory flows within the larger globalization process that establishes a free flow of capital and corporations yet inhibits the free flow of workers. Free trade agreements with developing countries, like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), privatized state functions for the benefit of the capitalist class, meanwhile displacing a whole class of peasants and rural workers. And the policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) provide an incentive for debt-ridden countries to embrace neoliberal reforms.

Sen and Mamdouh provide us with an alternate framework for looking at immigration reform. They suggest the equalization of power between workers and corporations, the expansion of legal immigration to protect the rights of immigrant workers, the building of transnational public welfare systems and global labor rights, and the free movement of workers, not just corporations.

Critiquing immigration using the lens of neoliberalism allows us to take a holistic look at the common plight affecting the working class — whether immigrant or not. *The Accidental American* inverts mainstream arguments that shape current immigration debate into one of xenophobia, U.S. hegemony, and social exclusion that centers on a policy of enforcement. Tackling what is inherently wrong and broken in the immigration system can become a point of empowerment for other groups as well.

The book reminds us that no one is “naturally” American; whether by a twist of fate, a lucky draw or forces beyond our control, there is an element of accident in every American’s story.

—KAREN YI

To read The Indypendent’s interview with author Rinku Sen, visit independent.org.



JAUME GUERRA

Granny Made Me an Anarchist: General Franco, the Angry Brigade and Me
BY STUART CHRISTIE
AK PRESS, 2007

Roots of My Radicalism

Growing up, many of us got from Granny what we didn’t get from Mom or Dad: attention, indulgence and wisdom, the stuff that molds identity and prepares us for the world. Scottish anarchist Stuart Christie describes his grandmother as his “strongest moral influence.” Independent, hard-working, generous and smart, she taught him to stand up for his beliefs and take the consequences.

And he has. As he recounts in *Granny Made Me an Anarchist*, his grandmother began teaching him right from wrong shortly after his 1946 birth, from tolerance toward Catholics to hatred for authoritarian rule. As a teenager he began reading political tracts and became incensed that Generalissimo Franco had retained his title as head of Spain’s government. Inspired by thousands of anti-fascists who joined the International Brigades of the 1930s, Christie became obsessed. “I simply could not understand why the Allies permitted Franco to remain in power after 1945,” he writes.

The question burned until Christie, determined to do something about what he saw as worldwide acquiescence to the dictator, found a group of like-minded youth. A plan was developed — direct action to show the world that “some people were still fighting the Franco regime.” Barely 18 and speaking no Spanish, Christie traveled to Madrid with explosives taped to his body. The scheme involved picking up a directive and then delivering the weapons to a saboteur. Not surprisingly, things went awry. “As I steeled myself to make a dash through the crowds, I was suddenly grabbed by both arms from behind, the anorak ripped from me, my face pushed to the wall and a gun barrel thrust into the small of my back... It was over in a matter of minutes,” he recalls.

In short order, Christie was charged with banditry and terrorism, death penalty offenses. The media ran sensationalist story af-

ter sensationalist story about the “kilted assassin.” A trial led to a guilty verdict and a two-decade sentence was imposed. Interestingly, while the memoir dubs the incident an act of adolescent rebellion, Christie neither condemns his youthful ardor nor denies the need to fight oppression by force. At the same time, he never romanticizes violence, knowingly presenting the psychological toll caused by hurting another person.

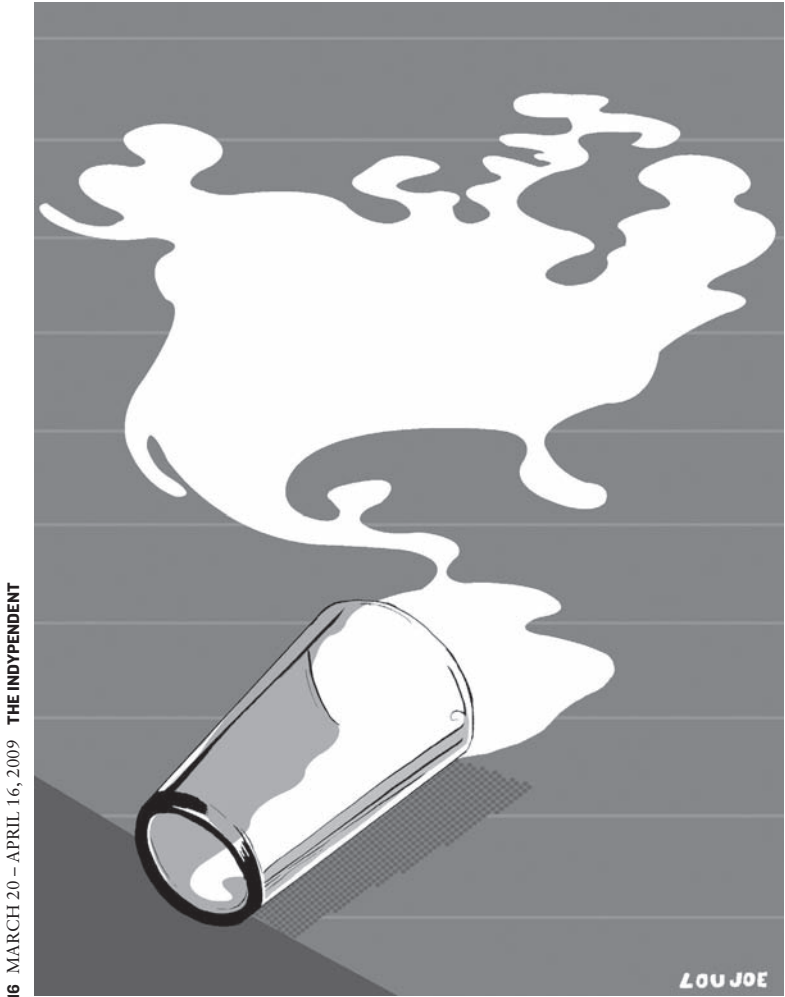
Christie served just three years of his punishment. Upon his release in 1967 he found that the world had exploded. His head spun as he learned of Israel’s six-day attack on Egypt and Syria; anti-Shah demonstrations in Iran; marches against the Vietnam war in the United States; and the death of Che Guevara. His response? Continued political engagement.

Attacks throughout the U.K., carried out by groups like the Angry Brigade, put Christie on police radar and his every move was monitored. The 1968 bombing of the homes of two British officials upped the ante and a drag-net eventually rounded up eight anarchists, including Christie. A yearlong trial ultimately freed him, but imprisoned several of his comrades.

It’s a gripping story, told with humor and passion. Unfortunately, the book ends with Christie’s 1975 acquittal and offers few clues about his next three decades as a writer and activist. That aside, Christie has crafted an engrossing—if occasionally communist-bashing—political thriller. Like all good memoirs, his story is emotional, fast-paced and moving. Better yet, its adherence to grandma’s moral stance resonates. As she said, “We are not bystanders to life.” Christie’s actions may not be your cup of tea, but his passion is exhilarating.

—ELEANOR J. BADER

April 1 is the 70th anniversary of the end of the Spanish Civil War, where General Francisco Franco founded his right-wing dictatorship.



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MUSIC

Rocking the Kashmir

A few months after Sept. 11, 2001, the shaggy-haired Mohsin Mohi-Ud-Din, and his older brother, Mubashir, went to visit relatives in Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir. Low-flying planes droned overhead. The State Assembly building had just been bombed by Pakistan-based Muslim militants, killing 38 people.

Kashmir, a mostly Muslim territory of 12 million people, has been disputed by India and Pakistan for more than 60 years. India controls most of it, including Srinagar. On his 2001 trip, Mohsin (who goes by Mo) was filming a documentary when massive demonstrations broke out. Indian police had tried to take bread from a local bakery without paying. The 17-year-old baker, a local musician, protested. The police took him outside and shot him in the middle of the street.

When they returned to the United States, Mubashir (who goes by Din) began writing political songs for the brothers' band, Zerobridge.

Zerobridge's music sounds familiar. They are a catchy and competent garage rock band that draws heavily from the Pixies and the Clash. Din, who wears a dark-brown kaffiyeh, croons vocals that alternate between Bono-like falsettos and the sneers of Iggy Pop, and Mo, the drummer, harmonizes. There are probably no other rock bands in New York that write tunes inspired by the conflicts in Kashmir.

"Just being in a band is political," Din said after a set at the Lower East Side club Rehab. When they first started playing, "it'd be a room full of shaggy white hipsters scratching their heads like, 'who are these guys?'"

But we didn't care, we felt like we had something to say."

On the track "Refugee Citizen," Din quietly growls, "Where do I go/There's nowhere to run, they don't know I'm here." As a lazy, Velvet Underground-like violin comes up in the track so does Din's vocals as he sings, "I'm under the gun, fuck everyone. I'm not leaving. No, I'm not leaving," letting that last line drag out until it's buried in the violin and guitar notes.

Din and Mo were raised in Potomac, Maryland, in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. The imam at their local mosque discouraged the youth from listening to rock music. "They said rock music was wrong, it was too sexual, too passionate, it had loose morals," Din remembers. "What they didn't understand was that it gave me so much else. It humbled me. It actually taught me to respect the world around me."

The two travel every year to Kashmir to visit relatives. They go there despite regular attacks by the Indian police and radical Islamic insurgents, which have increased dramatically since 1990.

"All our family is there. We can't just leave them. For us, it's a huge part of our tradition; it wouldn't be right," Din said.

The band is named after a bridge at a well-known scenic spot in Srinagar, where locals cross to visit the Zero Inn, a café that serves iced coffee with dollops of ice cream. The bridge was closed to traffic in 1998.

"Now, the bridge is covered with barbed wire. It's really decrepit," says Din, shaking his head. But he brightens up when he notes that "the same Sikh who runs the inn is still working there."

Din works in a doctor's office and plays shows at night. One of Zerobridge's videos has been featured on MTV World, where Mo was once a guest VJ. MTV World is also working with the band to create a Web site where Kashmiris

can upload documentaries and photos and blog as a way to promote dialogue and understanding about the Kashmir conflicts.

"MTV wants to use music and art to raise the debate about Kashmir, as a way to bring all sides to the table. Plus, Kashmir has never had a platform like this before, like they did with Darfur," says Mo, who also works for Human Rights First and is a Fulbright scholar currently living in Morocco. "It will have no agenda. It will just present the Kashmiri conflict, so it's not one opinion about what should be done. It will have each perspective, Indian, Pakistani, Kashmiri, from all sides."

"Kashmir doesn't make the top-ten tragedy list in the media ecosystem," explains Nusrat Durani, senior vice president of MTV World. "The most beautiful place in the world is now a nightmare." He hopes the site will help change that.

But not everyone thinks a website and MTV videos can bring change to Kashmir.

"It's not that easy. Twenty years of conflict has divided and polarized people who now won't even look at each other or talk to each other," said Aarti Tikoo Singh, a journalist who has written for the *Hindustan Times* and *Times of India* for the last 10 years in Jammu, Ladakh and Kashmir. "These initiatives should happen in Kashmir, not in America. We need to figure out how we can transplant this dialogue, this optimism, to Kashmir."

"Where are the stories about those living through this struggle?" Mo asked during a panel discussion at New York University School of Law last December. "People are so occupied with terms and classification that we forget to be human."

—STEPHEN NESSEN



NO SEX FOR YOU: Women in Tokyo (top) and New York City (bottom) perform readings of the play *Lysistrata* in 2003 as a way to protest the attack on Iraq. PHOTO: AQUAPIOFILMS.COM

FILM

Between Sex And War

Operation Lysistrata
DIRECTED BY
MICHAEL PATRICK KELLY
AQUAPIO FILMS
AVAILABLE ON DVD
FROM AQUAPIOFILMS.COM

A sparrow lies on his back in the middle of the highway. A passing horseman asks what he's doing, and the sparrow answers, "I heard that the sky was falling, so I'm holding it up."

"Do you really believe you can hold up the sky with those little legs?" asks the horseman.

"We do what we can," says the sparrow.

Operation Lysistrata begins with the fable of the sparrow, related by Arab-American actor F. Murray Abraham. It goes on to tell the exuberant story of how, on the eve of war in 2003, two women in New York City organized an unprecedented "world-wide theatrical act of dissent."

In January 2003, the Bush administration was rattling its sabers and trying to persuade the nation and the world that attacking Iraq was a good thing. On the other side of the political fence, antiwar activists were organizing to demonstrate against the war, and it was from that side that actors Kathryn Blume and Sharron Bower imagined a different kind of protest. They decided to stage a call to resist in the form of a reading of *Lysistrata*, Aristophanes' hilarious and wildly bawdy account of a sex strike by the women of Greece to force the Greek men to end the Peloponnesian War. Then Blume and Bower wondered

if anyone else, anywhere else, wanted to hold another reading, and the *Lysistrata* Project was born. On March 3, after nearly two months of non-stop international emails, phone calls, and website postings, more than 1,000 performances or readings from *Lysistrata* took place in 59 countries.

Videos and film from many of those events, along with interviews with Blume, Bower and other well-known, lesser-known and amateur actors, have been put together to make up *Operation Lysistrata*, the documentary.

Playwright Tony Kushner and Living Theater co-founder Judith Malina discuss the worldwide significance of the *Lysistrata* Project. A woman in Singapore describes a reading that neatly evaded a local law banning political gatherings or protests by more than three people. A teenager in the Midwest United States re-enacts the performance he put on in his living room, with his collection of plastic dinosaurs taking all the parts. A group of Chinese actors reading the play are reluctant to reveal their names, or even to say where in China they're holding the event. Kurdish refugees in a refugee camp in Patras, Greece, hold a reading by candlelight when their electricity fails, and an actor in Havana talks about the importance of theater as protest.

And from across the globe, large and small casts of embrace-evading women and men wearing rubber or plastic or leather phalluses romp across stages, repeating Aristophanes' descriptions of men making war and women doing what they can to stop it, even if doing what they can consists of reluctantly refusing to participate in "the sweetest thing in all the world."

—JUDITH MAHONEY
PASTERNAK



LYRICS WITH A PURPOSE: The band Zerobridge hopes their music will help bring a peaceful ending to the conflict between India and Pakistan over the territory of Kashmir. PHOTO: MYSPACE/ZEROBRIDGE

FILM

Slumdog Colonialism

Heaped with acclaim—eight Oscars and four Golden Globe awards — *Slumdog Millionaire* may mark the moment when Hollywood truly went global. Now, it already is a globalized industry with runaway productions, outsourced labor and distribution tentacles that penetrate most major markets, but Hollywood hopes it can become the 21st century center of multicultural creativity.

Hollywood’s goal, however, is not to succeed as a creative fount but as a profit hub. The Academy lavished *Slumdog Millionaire* with Oscars because of its box-office success; it’s a mediocre film, marked by wooden characters, weak dialogue and improbable plot turns.

What Hollywood is really celebrating is its ability to mine other cultures for raw material, manufacture a bland product with wide appeal and use its marketing juggernaut to rack up enormous profits.

Although Bollywood produces more films and sells more tickets annually than Hollywood (and by some accounts predates its American cousin), it took a Western production team and finance, led by director Danny Boyle, to make a Bollywood film that garnered Hollywood’s highest accolades. Showing the muscle of Hollywood, *Slumdog* has grossed more than \$200 million worldwide, far outstripping the most successful Bollywood film ever, *Sholay*, which has grossed \$60 million (inflation adjusted) since its 1975 premiere.

Slumdog’s success has also garnered it plenty of scorn. Critics deride it as “poverty porn” or “slum tourism” for portraying India as a violent, zealot-infested, garbage-strewn, shit-burbling backwater. Of course, there is plenty of truth in this portrayal, even as India’s elite want to deny it as fervently as they fantasize about India gliding toward a future of hi-tech prosperity.

Some, such as filmmaker and writer K. Hariharan, recognize that the “slums, criminals and gangsters that dominate” *Slumdog Millionaire* are a reality of India “in the same way as homeless Blacks and quarantined Native Indians are a reality to North America.” And the esteemed Indian director Satyajit Ray’s 1955 debut, *Pather Panchali*, is cloaked in poverty, but the poverty is not the subject and essence the way it is in *Slumdog Millionaire*.

This is why *Slumdog* has stirred such animosity. It is an example of Orientalism, a “semi-mythical construct” of the Orient, and at root, a “Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient” (as Edward Said defines it). It’s the cultural logic of the imperialist conquest of the East, and its trade is in images of a violent, mysterious, backward, irrational region and people.



S.M. VIDAURRI

Probably little, if any of this, entered Danny Boyle’s grizzled head. But he is keenly aware of colonialization. In *Trainspotting*, which brought him to fame, Ewan McGregor’s character, Renton, offers insight into the anomie afflicting him and his drug-addled mates.

“I hate being Scottish,” he rants. “We’re the lowest of the fucking low, the scum of the earth, the most wretched, servile, miserable, pathetic trash that was ever shat into civilization. Some people hate the English, but I don’t. They’re just wankers. We, on the other hand, are colonized by wankers. We can’t even pick a decent culture to be colonized by. We are ruled by effete arseholes.”

So Boyle could hardly be unaware of his position, coming from Irish extraction and English upbringing, journeying from the fallen British Empire to the cultural epicenter of the ruling American Empire, which gave him the cultural and financial capital to alight to Britain’s former “Jewel in the Crown” where he could produce a film adorned in the Bollywood style much the same way Westerners accessorize Eastern belief systems, lifestyles and culture as ephemeral fashions.

Boyle not only admitted his ignorance of India, he was delighted by it. He told one interviewer, “I knew nothing about India. ... I love [starting] off naked. I learned as I went along. That sense of discovery hopefully comes through in the film. To me, that’s exciting.” He even prattled about how in India “They really love movies,” as if there is some place in the world where movies are unloved.

Salmon Rushdie observed, “I imagined an Indian film director making a movie about New York low-life and saying that he had done so because he knew nothing about New York and had indeed

never been there. He would have been torn limb from limb by critical opinion.”

Critical opinion is no match for a box-office bonanza, however. Boyle has successfully appropriated an indigenous cultural form as a cheap commodity and used the Hollywood machine to transform it into a pricey finished good that can be sold to Westerners as a credible representation of the despair, desperation and hope that supposedly is India.

Slumdog’s success will spur new conquests by a Hollywood that long ago abandoned its golden age of 1970s-era anti-heroes and urban despair for its current menu of big-budget car chases, boobs and explosions.

In recent decades, there has been a new wave of filmmaking creativity in such countries as Iran, China, Brazil, South Korea, Romania and Mexico. Hollywood has noticed, venturing further afield to pluck production, directing and acting talent. In 2007, the Academy bestowed 16 Oscar nominations on three Mexican productions. But *Slumdog* is a qualitative difference. It extracted the whole form.

This bodes ill because it reveals a two-way trend toward dumbed-down cinema. Hollywood will adopt other cinematic forms as coatings for the same feel-good drivelt. At the other end, Bollywood for years has tried to present itself as the poor-man’s Hollywood with little but mountains of celluloid swill to show for it.

There is a bright spot, however. While vulgar American cinema of the *Slumdog* variety will remain dominant because of the immense marketing muscle behind it, creative cinema and talent will continue to bubble up between the cracks.

—ARUN GUPTA



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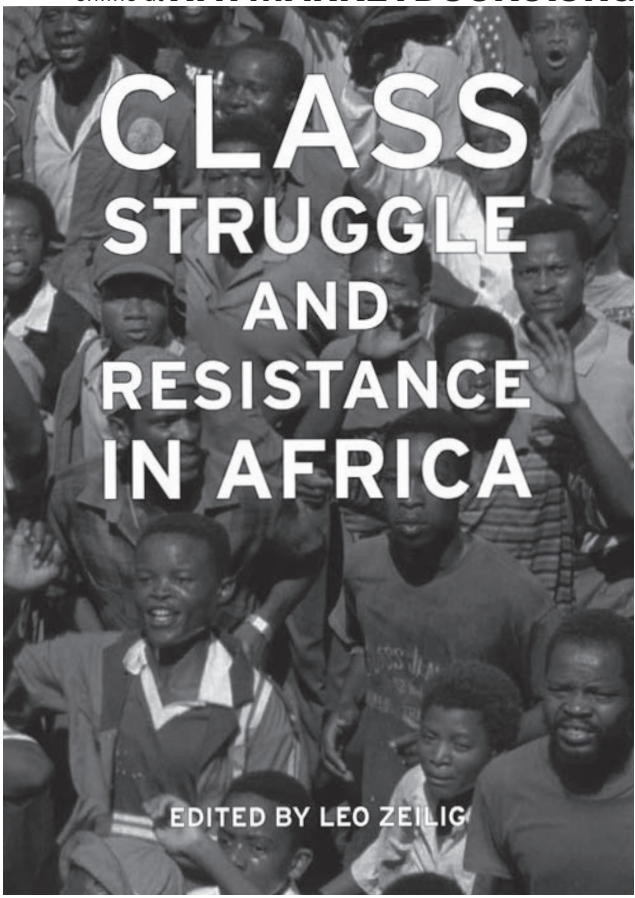
MON MAR 30, 7PM • FREE
READING: “BEYOND THE FIELDS.” In *Beyond The Fields*, author Randy Shaw reveals the untold story of how the spirit of “si se puede,” which began with Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers in the 1960s, still sets the course for today’s social justice movements.

SAT APR 4, 7PM • FREE
READING: “MY LITTLE RED BOOK.” 18-Year-old Rachel Kauder Nalebuff is the editor of *My Little Red Book*, a collection of first period essays from writers, feminists and women of all walks of life.

WED APR 15, 7PM • \$5 SUGG
PANEL: DIRECT ACTION LABOR STRUGGLE AND SOCIAL CHANGE. Join three labor movement leaders, Cesar Barturen, Daniel Gross and Liberte Locke, to examine the possibilities of returning to a labor and social movement based on direct action and rank n’ file control.

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